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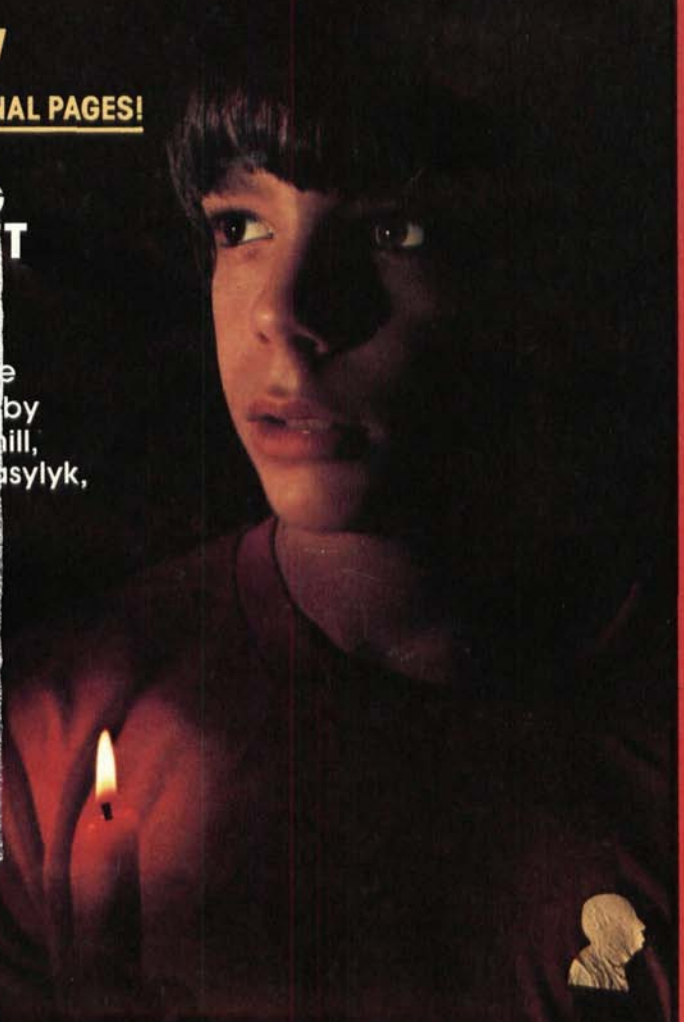
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TO MEET
TERRY**

by Rick Hills

and 10 more
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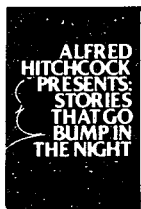
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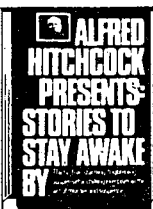
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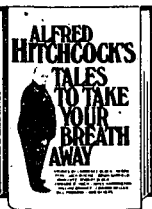
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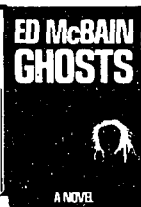
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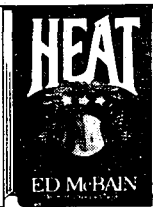
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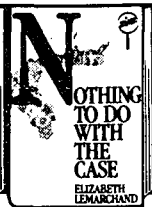
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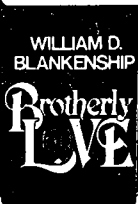
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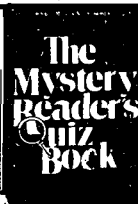
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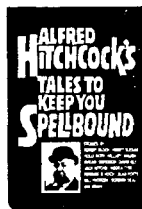
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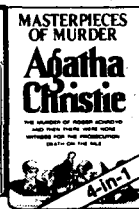
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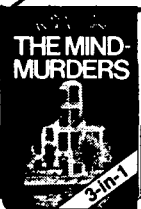
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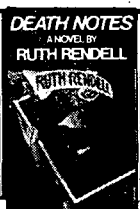
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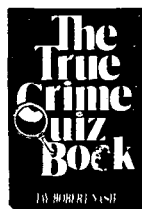
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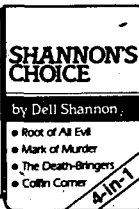
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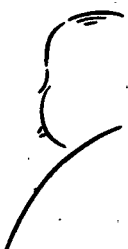
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Dear Readers:



If you *really* like mysteries and want to try your hand at solving one, you can do it (for a price, but then crime doesn't pay, and *always* costs) at a mystery weekend once a year, in what must be a nearly perfect setting. Several years ago, Dilys Wynn (author of *Murder Ink* and *Murderess Ink*) and Carol Brenner, then proprietresses of a mystery bookstore in New York City also called Murder Ink, got up the first one, a gathering at Mohonk Mountain House near New Paltz, N.Y., that has been going strong ever since. It always takes place on the weekend nearest March 15th (as in "Beware the ides of . . .").

According to our sources (actually, Elana Lore, editor of *Crime Digest*, who at this writing is recently returned from the latest one, "The Teacup Caper"), Mohonk Mountain House is a huge Victorian mansion on top of a mountain, appropriately fitted out with fireplaces in the bedrooms, clawfooted bathtubs, and the like. It stands at the end of Mohonk Lake, and a map of the grounds reveals the existence of such intriguing-sounding appurtenances as a labyrinth, a tower overlooking a reservoir, and a crevice. There is a granary and a stable and a stone summer house, an Artist's Lodge, a lookout point, and a greenhouse, and one can investigate areas of the grounds like what lies along Bruin Path (past the Cutting Garden and the Herb Garden) or Fox Path, Undercliff Path or Lambdin's Glen. The front door faces Sunset Path and a big lounge in the back overlooks the lake and the mountain, Sky Top, immediately beyond it.

In March, all of this is likely to be under snow; those fireplaces could feel good.

The mystery weekend is actually a Thursday-night-to-Sunday-afternoon affair, attended by some 350 mystery fans divided into teams at the start. A murder is—as always—staged, and it's up to the guests to solve it before they leave. "The Teacup Caper," in fact, involved *three* murders, starting with that of The Honourable Sycophant Teasdale, done in at his own tea table, which the gathering had been summoned to investigate. The second, that of Frank Wright, an American private eye working on a case, occurred in everyone's midst the first evening, and on Saturday

morning a hiking party stumbled over the third body, that of the houseboy, lying in the snow. There were clues everywhere all weekend, as well as lots of red herrings, some of them handed out by Ms. Wynn and company at the beginning, others waiting to be found by the alert as the weekend progressed. One evening the group of suspects appeared—the laird, the postmistress, et cetera—all in their lairdly and postmistressly dress and ready for questioning; they were required to tell the truth (without, of course, giving the game away).

While the finding and unravelling of clues is going on, miscellaneous other events are taking place. Isaac Asimov has, in past years, had a mystery limerick contest; this year a contest to design a coat of arms for the victim's family was held, a jumble sale offered such items as a table full of Blunt Objects, and an Edward Gorey drawing was auctioned off. In between were talks by mystery author Ruth Rendell, playwright Frederick Knott (*Dial M for Murder*), and Donald Rumbelow, London bobby and nonfiction writer on Jack the Ripper. And on Sunday morning the murderer's identity is revealed, after each team of guests has come up with its answer to whodunit, and why, and presented it cleverly—one group set their answer to a Gilbert and Sullivan tune, another in the form of an old fashioned radio show complete with commercials.

If it all gets too much for you, you can go skiing instead, or just watch, or curl up with a murder mystery (written). But it sounds like fun, and a practical way of finding out, for once and for all, just how sharp your own deductive powers are.

Next year's host will be Donald Westlake; reservations are accepted starting December 1st. We'll let you know how to make them when the time gets a bit nearer.

We promised last month an expanded issue this time around, and here it is, we're glad to say! And we believe we left a sentence unfinished, on the subject of More to Come. Well, the More to Come is on its way in the August issue, and we very much hope you'll be as pleased with it as we are. It involves not only more space for fiction than we've had in the past but new departments and features and a whole new look for AHMM—a new type face and a new design, better-looking and easier to read, a variety of

artists to illustrate the stories with spreads or single pieces, and art for the covers instead of photography. And Mr. Hitchcock will be back on the covers, in an interesting new way.

Inside, we'll have an article or two for you each time, on some aspect of the mystery field, reviews of new mystery films and new books, and an author profile. There'll be a puzzle or two to solve, and a Mystery Photograph to decipher, and a special Mystery Classic—a reprint of a story we think is particularly good and one you may not know about.

And whatever else we do, AHMM will continue to be a fiction magazine, crammed with as many good stories as we can get into it, by the best authors we can find.

One of those good authors, Leslie Alan Horvitz, author of "The Dragon's Lady" in this issue, has a new book out. *The Donors* is a medical thriller, written in collaboration with H. Harris Gerhard, M.D. (a doctor writing under a pseudonym), and published by Signet in paperback (\$2.95). Mr. Horvitz is a former Fawcett editor and the author of two previous novels.

Cathleen Jordan
Editor

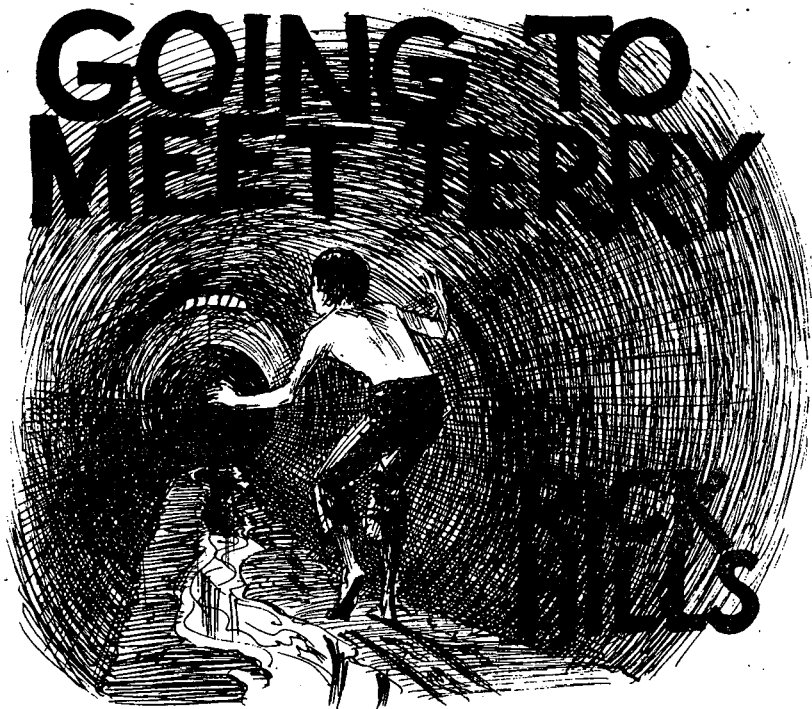
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It was a dangerous place for the children to play, but that was why Nathan liked it. That and being all alone there. Until the morning he slipped out of the house . . .



It was August, it was Sunday morning, and it was hot. Nathan woke quickly, he had things to do. He had to get out of the house without waking anyone, and he had to go meet Terry.

Barefoot and bareback was how Nathan felt today, so he wore only the jeans his mother hated most. He crept down the carpeted stairway that led to the front door and to freedom, making sure to tiptoe on the outside of each stair. The less-traveled carpet pleased his bare feet. And Nathan

GOING TO MEET TERRY

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knew that this was the only way to walk the steps without the old wood underneath creaking its usual creak and waking his parents. Sunday morning meant they'd sleep late which also meant there'd be no note for Nathan, no list of household chores he'd be expected to do before he could leave the house.

He made it through the heavy front door without a sound. The screen door's rusted spring groaned with reluctance as he opened it just wide enough to get through, but then it slipped from his grasp and slammed shut with a tattletale bang. Nathan stopped breathless for a second, straining his ears for any commotion inside the house. When he didn't hear anything, he turned and walked like an Indian across the wooden porch and leapt the three porch steps down to the grass. As he landed he thought to himself, "All right! I made it!"

Back in his parents' bedroom his mother stirred from her sleep and asked his father, "Did you hear something, dear?"

"Go back to sleep," his father answered. "It was just Nathan going out the front door."

Nathan's bare feet hit the front yard grass like flat stones skipping across smooth water. His nostrils filled with the smell of morning mist before the sun gets to it. The warm moist air was quite a change from the all-night coolness of the house and Nathan's skin goose-pimpled to get used to it. The feeling of getting away from something surrounded him as he kicked his way through the cool morning dew, yesterday's grass clippings clinging to his wet feet. The sidewalk was still cool in the elm shadows that covered every front yard on his block. Nathan looked back over his shoulder to watch his wet footprints gradually fade into dry as the cement soaked up each of his steps. "I'm the only one who knows where I am right now," Nathan thought to himself. The feeling of freedom that buzzed around his head found a home in his legs and he was off and running. It seemed the fastest he'd ever run, but it didn't seem to take any effort. Down the block he went, past Stimml's, past Johnson's, then Kennedy's, and finally he came to a stop in front of the big house on the corner, The House-With-No-Men. There was a great-grandmother, a grandmother, a mother, and her daughter—but no men. The house was well-kept, spotless, and a little bit scary. Nathan glanced up the two steep terraces to the house and caught a glimpse of the old woman who constantly sat in her wheelchair, staring out across the broad front porch from behind

a huge picture window. Nathan had heard from the older kids in the neighborhood that she couldn't walk, but Nathan had never even seen her move. She always sat the same way, in the same place, staring, staring all day long. But it was too nice a day and Nathan was feeling too good to waste his time thinking about the old woman. He crossed the street in front of The-House-With-No-Men.

Nathan walked on slowly, acting like he didn't know where he was going, but knowing all the time. The sidewalk stretched out in front of him for a while and then was cut in two by some railroad tracks. Nathan didn't know where they came from, but he knew they ended up at Bodie's Lumberyard where his older brother worked Saturdays for all the pop he could drink and to shape up his muscles for high school football. The sidewalk picked up again on the other side of the tracks and it wasn't long before it turned into a concrete footbridge crossing over The Crick. Somewhere down below the footbridge was where he'd meet Terry. And if Terry wasn't there yet, he would be soon.

Nathan walked out onto the footbridge and looked down into the murky water below. This was the favorite place of the neighborhood, this was The Crick. Almost all its banks were steep, slippery mud, overgrown with patches of itchweed and stickerbushes. But here, the banks had been built from great chunks of stone block to keep them from caving in. On one of the blocks you could barely make out the number 1896, chiseled into it long ago but worn smooth over the years. Just below that, the cracks between the blocks made a natural ladder you could dig your bare toes into and climb down the wall to the sandbars and the water's edge. The stone walls made it feel like an open air room with a stream running through the middle. The water flowed in under a street bridge, over rocks and broken tiles, and gouged through ever-changing sandbars filled with half-buried tin cans and an old bicycle rim. Then it slipped quietly into a large washed-out pool with more tiles on the bottom. The tiles were flat and slick, nearly impossible to keep from slipping on with wet feet. But on the steeper sides of the banks, where they rose up out of the water, some of the tiles had broken off or worn away, leaving iron bars exposed. These were the only handholds across the tiles. The places where there were no handholds were the places you just couldn't go.

The cool crick air puffed up now and then, hitting Nathan in the face, bringing with it a damp, clinging smell of stagnant water and sewage. The

stagnant water came from upstream, the sewage from a cement tunnel cut back like a cave into the sheer stone wall. The older kids said it ran under the street six or seven blocks up to the Municipal Hospital. There was always water running out of it and once Nathan had seen bits of blood-soaked cloth floating by—hospital bandages, he and Terry had decided—so all the younger kids took it for granted that the older kids knew what they were talking about. The smell was ripe, and it amazed Nathan how it never bothered the kids but always bothered the parents. The Crick was so much fun because it was strictly forbidden (“You’re going to catch polio down there, you know that, don’t you?” is what Nathan’s father constantly told him), and it was the smell that always gave you away and usually got you grounded for a week. The smell was such a sure thing that if you really wanted a fight, all you had to do was splash somebody on purpose.

Nathan leaned out over the guard rail and stared at his reflection below. Then he watched a ball of white spit ease slowly from his lips. Finally it fell as he watched the spit and its reflection race towards each other, colliding with a splat on the surface of the water, sending rings out breaking up his reflection. “Maybe that’s why Terry isn’t here yet,” Nathan thought to himself. “Maybe Irv caught him yesterday and he’s grounded for a week.” Nathan didn’t like Terry’s oldest brother Irv. Ever since Terry’s dad left, Irv had been acting like a big shot.

Nathan spit again but didn’t wait for it to hit the water. “Well, either he’s coming or he’s not,” Nathan thought as he turned away from the railing. “I can’t wait for him all day.”

Nathan sat on top of the stone wall where the crawl-way started and dangled his legs over the edge, the dark mouth of the storm sewer opening up and gently trickling its water out into the pool just below him. The time didn’t seem right to crawl down yet, so he picked up some loose pebbles and killed time tossing them into the water, first kerplunking them out in the middle of the pool and then eye-dropping them like a bombardier straight down in the storm sewer stream. Nathan heard something close and spun around quickly to see if it was Terry sneaking up behind him. The Big Joke at The Crick was to pretend like you were going to push your buddy off the wall, and sitting the way he was, Nathan was an easy target for the fake push from behind. But there was no sign of Terry. Nathan remembered how the fake pushes sometimes scared you into laughing, sometimes scared you into being mad. He searched for

Terry again when he heard the noise again, only to see a squirrel scratching his way up the bark of a gnarled oak tree. Nathan laughed at himself for the false alarm and went back to pebbling. Staring at the water made him daydream and as he listened to the different gurgles and rushings of crick water, the sounds took over his ears and seemed so loud inside his head that he was aware of nothing else. Then he thought he heard something else from The Crick, first very faint and very low, a far away moaning that built on itself, getting louder and more painful, and then an all-out howl, filled with hurt and despair, was in The Crick—and it was coming down and out of the storm sewer! Nathan's breath quickened as the howl echoed and died out of the opening and when it was gone he wasn't sure if he had really heard it at all. But there it was again, a low, damp, rumbling of a moan this time, becoming almost a growl that made Nathan instinctively pull his legs up to safety. He spun around to see if anyone passing by might have heard it, too, but no one else was around, the streets and sidewalks were deserted. The instant of silence after the sewer noise was soon filled, was almost crashed in on by the rush of water noise. Nathan saw something move about a block away and recognized a dog, dancing excitedly in the gutter, his nose popping in and out of one of the sewer grates. The dog's body jerked as if he were barking and then the sound echoed down and out of the sewer opening once again. "Lousy dog!" Nathan muttered to himself. "Probably chased a rat down the sewer and now can't do anything but bark about it." Nathan watched as the dog jumped back from the curb, then bounded up into The-House-With-No-Men's yard, its nose close to the ground, stopping to double-check some smell and then zigzagging on to the next smell until he wandered out of sight. Nathan took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, feeling himself relax. He turned back to The Crick but for some reason something seemed wrong. Nathan felt in a sudden flash that he should leave The Crick, that he should go home. But then it passed. "For crying out loud," he thought to himself, "it's only The Crick."

Nathan started down the crawl-way to The Crick below. Climbing down was harder than climbing up and the hardest part of climbing down was the first step. Nathan had to turn around so his back was to The Crick, then lower himself over the edge until he could rest all his weight on his stomach. He slowly let himself down, and then down again, stretching his legs as far down the wall as they could go. He looked off in the distance at nothing, his mind instead watching the unseen wall below, his bare

toes searching for that first toehold big enough to hold his weight and allow him to work his way down the crevices to The Crick's edge. Once off the wall he sat on some rocks and picked rock-grit off his belly. Nathan wouldn't admit it but the climb always scared him. No matter how many times he went up or down the wall, he was glad when the climb was over.

The climb down was short, but what a difference it made. The gentle puffs of cool air that escaped The Crick up top were now a constant breeze, closer to a cold damp wind. The water sounds seemed too loud for such slow-running water and the steep walls all but cut out any direct sunlight. The wind, the water, and the walls blotted out the real world and left Nathan the only one in a world all his own. The only intrusion was the rare passing of a car over the street bridge, and then the rumbling that took place was more like captured thunder than a car passing by. Nathan could remember spending days in a row in The Crick without one person walking the short footbridge. A feeling of being totally free swept over him and in its wake, a feeling of being totally alone. "I wonder what the hell is keeping Terry?" he said to the water. His pleasure from swearing like the older kids helped soothe his irritation at his friend.

Nathan mechanically rolled his pants legs up over his knees and started for the water. He chose a shallow spot with mostly sand on the bottom and waded a few quick steps out towards the nearest sandbar. He was careful not to stub his foot on any of the underwater rocks, both for his feet's sake and because he didn't want to disturb the rocks. He knew that if there were any crawdaddys around, that's where they'd be. Nathan wasn't exactly afraid of crawdaddys. He hunted them all the time with Terry. But when he was alone, he'd just as soon leave the crawdads alone.

When he reached the sandbar, the wet sand sponged down under his weight and then each footprint seeped full of water. Nathan was still thinking crawdaddys. He remembered the time he and Terry had caught a bunch of them and hollowed out an arena in one of the sandbars. Then they put all the crawdads in the center and watched them fight each other, pushing the ones that tried to crawl out back into the fight. For some reason, Terry decided to inch his way across the steep tiles to find some more. Just for a joke, Nathan waited until Terry reached the steepest part, the place where you had your hands full just staying in one place. Then he quickly picked up the biggest crawdad and, holding it at arm's length from his body, yelled, "Hey, Terry! Catch!" Terry looked up in time to see the crawdad leave Nathan's hand but he couldn't dodge the

throw without slipping off the tiles. He stood there frozen, watching the crawdaddy arc across the pool and land squarely on his chest. Nathan was waiting for the fun but got more than he expected. Instead of bouncing off Terry's chest, the crawdad somehow hooked onto his shirt and clung there. Terry panicked at seeing the claws stuck to him, screamed, flailed at his shirt to knock the crawdad off his chest, and lost his footing. He slid down the tiles, trying to catch himself all the way and finally went into the water up to his waist, the crawdad falling harmlessly into the water in front of him. Nathan was so surprised that his first laugh came out as a hard cough. Then he remembered the look on Terry's face and laughed until he laughed himself out, saying now and then, "You should have seen your face!" and "You've got to admit, Terry, it *was* funny!" But Terry wouldn't admit anything and he sure didn't laugh. Yeah, there'd almost been a big fight over that one.

Nathan's daydreaming vanished and his whole body jerked before he realized what was going on. There it was again, that same low, pain-filled moan, rolling down from up inside the storm sewer. "Goddamn dog!" Nathan said quickly, so as to scare away his fear. The howl started again but instead of dragging on and on, it stopped short, each echo of the stopping making the silence seem louder and louder. "That didn't scare me, just surprised me," he said, not being able to take his eyes off the black mouth of the tunnel. The harder he stared into the darkness, the more it seemed to draw him toward it. A tightness swelled up from his stomach as he started slowly toward the opening. "I don't know," Nathan thought to himself, "maybe there is something in there. Maybe—" And then the air around him exploded with thundering rumbles as a car passed over the street bridge. Nathan wanted to run everywhere at once and so couldn't move at all. "For crying out loud, what's got into you!" Nathan scolded himself. "First a dog and now a car. You big baby!" He took a couple of deep breaths. Then he glanced all around. The Crick to remind himself of where he was. He even looked directly overhead, as if to make sure the lazy clouds were still drifting along in the late summer sky. But then his eyes wandered back to the black hole of the tunnel, as he had known they would eventually. And he also knew he would have to go into the storm sewer. Any reason for not going in there now would simply be a lie.

Nathan didn't hesitate at the opening, except to crouch down to keep

from bumping his head as he ducked into the dark. The first thing he noticed was the cold, clammy dampness that clung to his skin like a wet T-shirt on a cold night. There was a steady wind coming down the sewer but all it brought was the smell of stale air and sewage. Nathan stopped a few steps into the tunnel to let his eyes adjust to the sudden darkness that crowded in around him. He strained to see deeper into the black, but black was all he saw. All the outside sounds had disappeared and in their place was a silence only dark places have, broken by the slow running stream and a distant dripping, echoing from somewhere deep in the blindness ahead.

Nathan worked his way farther and farther into the tunnel, and the farther he went, the darker it got. Every step took him away from the light outside and into the blackness. He began stumbling over things he couldn't see and the wind played tricks on his ears. He kept telling himself he'd get used to the staleness, but the air smelled just as bad as it had at first. Whenever he thought he heard something move, he'd stop dead, holding his breath. But all he would hear was the running water and the drip . . . drip . . . dripping up ahead. Nathan glanced over his shoulder and with the help of the faint light from the opening saw that the tunnel behind him was empty. But when he turned to look in front of him, all he saw was blackness. It was time to push on. He hadn't gone in far enough yet to be able to turn around and walk back out. "If this is all the farther I was going in, I may as well have not come in at all," he told the walls. Then he made a deal with himself. "I'll go in at least to the first sewer grate, the one where I saw the dog."

Nathan continued on, deeper into the sewer. He walked along the edge of the tunnel, partly to keep out of the water running down the middle, and partly to touch the wall every so often. The wall was damp, but it gave him a sense of security, a sense of where he was in the darkness, to touch it every few steps. With each step, the tunnel seemed to be closing in on him. The bottom was no longer dry along the edges, but had thick, cold mud all the way over to the wall. It was deep enough that as Nathan stepped on it, it held his weight momentarily and then he broke through the wet crust, the slime oozing through his toes and climbing up over his foot, to his ankle. Broken rocks embedded in the mud and along the concrete bottom sometimes slid by his feet, sometimes jabbed into them. He thought he was bent over enough but he kept bumping his head on the low ceiling. Cobwebs would suddenly land on

his face and string out over his bare shoulders. When the first web hit him, he lurched upright, banging his head hard on the concrete. As he tried to rub away the pain, he felt his hair matted with dirt and web. After that, the cobwebs just made him angry and with his anger he felt more courage, he felt like attacking the sewer, he felt he had the sewer whipped.

Up ahead Nathan was finally able to see a faint light. "There's my sewer grate," he thought, glad to be headed out of the dark instead of into it. He looked back toward the opening, but it had disappeared in the darkness. The only light was up ahead, barely visible, spilling down from the street next to The-House-With-No-Men. "This sewer ain't so bad," he thought. "Piece of cake. Wait until Terry—" but his thoughts were stopped when he heard a loud splash up ahead. And before he could be sure if he heard a splash or not, another howl came rolling down the sewer, and then another right behind the first. Even before the echoes had a chance to die, Nathan knew what to do next. "I've had it with that dog," he muttered out loud. "Time someone taught him a lesson!"

What light there was from the sewer grate allowed Nathan to shuffle quickly through the mud, almost running, hunched over, the mud sucking at each foot and splashing up his legs. As he went closer and closer to the opening, the howls became louder and louder, tumbling over and over each other on down the tunnel behind him. But there was no place for fear in Nathan. All he could think about was reaching the sewer grate, screaming up at the dog on the street, and scaring the daylight out of him. "Who knows," it occurred to Nathan, "I might get lucky and he'll run in front of a car." Nathan was glad for the howling because it meant the dog would still be there where he could scare him. Nathan jumped into the light and started his scream—but it never left his throat. The grate was empty. No dog, no nothing. The echoes left the sewer. The only sounds were the running water, the dripping, and Nathan's heavy breathing. He stared up at the empty grate in disbelief. "He couldn't have run away that fast. How could he get away so fast?" he asked the grate. The water trickled by beneath his feet.

Nathan sat on his haunches, his head down, trying to catch his breath. He was still wondering about the dog so he didn't have time to look at what his eyes were already seeing. Gradually, he focused in on the spot where he'd been looking and what he saw made him instinctively slosh backwards a few steps. Footprints! Barefoot footprints in the mud, leading

back even farther into the darkness. He went to them, compared them with his own, and suddenly the dog was the farthest thing from his mind. "Somebody else is in the sewer. Somebody else is back there." Nathan wanted to run, to get as far away as possible, but his legs wouldn't move. Then he heard it again, the moaning was starting all over again. He shot his eyes up to the grate, but it was still empty. The moaning came again, but this time he knew where it came from—from out of the blackness, echoing from deeper in the sewer. The moaning was softer than before, a tired, worn-out moan that trailed off almost into sobbing. Fear took a hold on his stomach and gave it a hard twist, making his entire body go tight. Suddenly there wasn't enough air in the tunnel and he had to grab the front of his jeans to keep from wetting them. The sobs came down the tunnel again at him and he felt exposed, standing in the dim light from the grate above. Anything in the darkness could see him without being seen. He thrashed through the mud, a few steps deeper into the sewer, and waited. Nothing. Thoughts flashed through Nathan like popcorn cooking over a high flame. "Should I yell? Or shouldn't I? Maybe they don't know I'm here. Maybe I could get away. If I yell, they'll find me. What if they're hurt? What if they want to hurt me?" That last one struck home and Nathan had turned to head back out of the tunnel, out of the blackness, when he was stopped by the moaning once more. "Help. Somebody. Help." The words came out slow and weak, hardly loud enough to cause an echo. Nathan squinted into the darkness, cupped a hand to his mouth and shouted. "Hello! Is anybody there . . . anybody there . . . anybody there" rolled up and down the sewer, the words banging louder and longer than Nathan had wanted. Then the silence took over what seemed forever, and finally Nathan heard weeping in the distance, some gasps, and then the long, hard howl again, slamming down the sewer walls, rushing over him, making his body shake and bringing an unexpected whimper from his lips. "Hang on, I'm coming . . . coming . . . coming . . . coming . . ." and Nathan forced himself to move deeper and deeper into the sewer where he thought the cries were coming from.

Once past the street grate, the sewer returned just as stale, just as cold, and just as black as before. Nathan continued farther into the blackness, stopping now and then to listen to see how much farther he had to go. He finally heard some movement up ahead of him and stopped. It was coming toward him, out of the darkness. Closer and closer he could hear the mud move and then the claws dug into his foot as a ball of wet

fur grazed his leg and whatever it was squealed as it splashed its way through the muck behind him and on down the sewer. It all happened so fast that Nathan's heart didn't start pounding until the animal was already past him. "Take it easy," he told himself. "Whatever-that was is just as scared as you are."

A spark of light flickered twice against the wall somewhere down in the darkness and then went out. "Do you have matches . . . matches . . . matches . . ." Nathan shouted. But no answer. A couple of steps farther and Nathan saw another flicker, only closer, and then all was black again. "I think I see you . . . see you . . . see you. . . . Light another one . . . nother one . . . nother one. . . ." But again no answer.

Nathan had never been this far back in the sewer, only the older kids. He wished his older brother were there right now. Nathan struggled on, trying to find good footing where he couldn't see a thing. He kept touching the wall for support and aiming toward where he last saw the flicker of light. He reached out for the wall again but it wasn't there. Nathan didn't think he had slipped that far out into the middle of the tunnel, but he took another step towards where the wall should be and still found nothing. He swung his arm in a slow, wide arc through the blackness and finally his hand struck cement. But it was a corner of a wall, the one he'd been touching all along, and then another one headed off to his left. "Another tunnel off this one?" Keeping his hand on the new wall, Nathan carefully took a step into the new tunnel. He waited a moment, listened, then took another step. He started his next step but kicked something large and wet lying on the tunnel floor. A bright flash of light exploded in his face and a wet slippery hand reached up and grabbed Nathan by the leg, squeezing hard, digging its nails into his flesh. He kicked out frantically, trying to break away, as his ears were filled with that same howl, roaring up from whatever had hold of him. Nathan's own scream joined the howl and he felt his head begin to spin. The howling died away, and as it did, the book of matches that had been ignited all at once burned down to a candlelike flame. Nathan's eyes adjusted to the lesser light but what he saw made him shake his head back and forth, sobbing, "No! No! It can't be!" There, lying at Nathan's feet, in a pool of filth and blood, one trembling hand holding the flickering book of matches, his other hand, caked with blood, grasping desperately at Nathan's leg, was Terry, his eyes looking helplessly up at Nathan through pain and blood and sewage.

"Terry! Aw hell, Terry. What's happened to you?"

Terry coughed and Nathan saw red spit ooze out of the corner of his mouth. "Help. Someone, please," Terry hissed through clenched teeth. "Don't let her get me. Not again."

"Terry! It's me, Nathan. What happened?"

"Nathan? You found me. Oh God, you found me. . . ." Terry gasped for breath as Nathan felt Terry's hand lose its grip on his leg. As he started to slide into the sewer water, Nathan grabbed him by the bloodstained shirt and tried to drag him into a sitting position.

"Oh God! Don't touch me!" Terry said through his pain. "I'm hurt, Nathan, she hurt me real bad."

"Who did, Terry, who hurt you?"

"The old lady. The old lady—oh God, she hurt me bad." The flickering of the matchbook dimmed. Nathan couldn't tell where the filth stopped and the blood began.

"What old lady, Terry?"

Terry ran his free hand across his face, streaking a watery red that ran down his cheeks. In between heavy breaths he spit out his words in short, choppy bursts. "The old lady . . . in the wheelchair. . . . At the House-With-No-Men. . . . She can walk, Nathan. This tunnel is a passage . . . a secret passage Oh, Nathan, she can walk!"

"Secret passage? What secret passage, Terry?"

Terry coughed again, struggling to talk. "I waited for you, Nathan. . . . I waited for you. . . . But you didn't come."

"What secret passage!"

"I found a door down here . . . into her basement. She caught me, Nathan. She outran me. . . . Hurt me real bad. Go get help . . . before she comes back."

"Come on, Terry, I'll get you out of here," and Nathan started to drag Terry to his feet. Terry's body jerked hard and another doglike howl escaped his lips, a howl starting low in his throat and then forced out hard, like trying to blow out a hundred candles at once. Then he lay quiet while the moan echoed its way down the sewer. "I can't move. But she'll be back. . . . She's coming back for me."

"Where is she now?"

"She went back to her cellar. Go before . . . before she gets you!" and the matches burned out, blackness rushed in on both of them. Nathan couldn't even see Terry, although he still had hold of his arm.

"Terry! Terry! Are you all right?"

"Go, Nathan . . . I hear something! She's coming back!" and Nathan felt Terry push him out toward the main sewer.

"I'm going, Terry," Nathan whispered back to the darkness. "I'm going but I'll be right back," and he searched frantically for the cement corner that would tell him he was in the main tunnel. As soon as he found it, he ran as fast as the mud and the dark and being hunched over would allow, one hand held out for the wall. Suddenly another howl came down the sewer stopping Nathan as if the mud had turned to glue. He heard voices and slowly looked back into the blackness to where they were coming from. Now there was only one voice, high-pitched like screeching tires or fingernails on a blackboard. Then a light appeared back where he left Terry; it looked like a flashlight, not the beam of light but the leftover light from around the edges. It glowed out of the secret tunnel, forming a dim curtain of light across the sewer. An old lady's laugh came out from where Terry was lying and rushed down the sewer past Nathan. "Well, well, well. How's my little intruder doing? My little sewer rat, crawling around near my cellar, eh?"

"No! I wasn't doing anything, honest!"

"I think my little rat is lying to me, eh? I think it's time you see the rest of my cellar. I'll show you what I do to filthy, lying, little sewer rats, heh heh. . . . Wait a minute—what's this I see? Had a visitor while I was gone, eh? Another little intruder?" Nathan caught his breath and crouched even lower.

"You know what I think, little sewer rat? I think you need someone to keep you company in my cellar." Nathan's legs ached from being bent so long. He couldn't take his eyes off the dim glow of the light back deep in the sewer. The light had started getting brighter and brighter, the beam moving out toward the main sewer. "If that light turns the corner," Nathan thought, "I'm as good as dead." But the light moved back to the way it was before, and then the old lady's voice came again. "Yes, yes, yes. You are a mess, my little boy." Nathan's head was on fire. "Leave him alone, leave him alone!" his mind screamed at her. From down the tunnel he heard, "Your little friend can't be far away." Nathan started moving as carefully and as quietly as he could. His foot shucked up out of the mud, no louder than a whisper, but Nathan felt cheated by being that careful and still making so much noise. "It's time, it's time, eh?" came the old woman's voice. "But first, my sweet little rat, I think I'll

just—" and Terry's most bloodcurdling scream yet roared out of the silence, the howl catching Nathan off guard as his feet went out from under him in the slippery blackness. Nathan fell hard on his backside in the cold slime. The tunnel was overflowing with sound. The echo of Terry's scream was still banging down the sewer and then "Ah heh heh heh!" surrounded Nathan and seemed as if it would never leave. Trying to regain his feet in the greaselike mud, Nathan saw the light bouncing down the secret tunnel, swinging back and forth like whoever was carrying it was running, and then it was in the middle of the main sewer shining directly at Nathan, the instant brightness blinding him. "Neh heh heh heh," came from behind the blindness. "Is this my other little rat? Just stay right where you are and I'll come and get you, eh?" Nathan finally found his feet and used them like never before. Hunched low and leaning forward, there was no time to touch the wall now, he raced down the middle of the sewer, the mud sucking at his feet, trying to hold him back. "Neh heh heh heh heh" rushed up from behind him and then past him just as fast, rolling over and over, losing itself out ahead in the darkness. The light from the flashlight danced crazily on his back, the walls, and the ceiling. He looked back but all he could see was the bright ball of light jerking back and forth, getting closer and closer. But the light also helped him see a little bit in front of him, allowed him to see where to run, what to jump. And there up ahead was the dim light from the open sewer grate. He could yell, somebody would hear him! Nathan was running too fast to stop under the grate, his feet slipping out from under him as they were, and he slid through the mud under the opening above. Even before he stopped sliding, Nathan regained his balance, scrambled back into the light, put his face as close to the opening as he could, and screamed, "Help! Somebody! Help! Help!" He spun around and looked back up the tunnel, but the light was gone. He listened for footsteps but the only sound was his own echo, way off down the sewer, a faint, distant "Help . . . help . . . help . . ." Then the echo was gone, and in its place was, first, the silence, then the sound of running water, and then the drip . . . drip . . . dripping.

Nathan breathed as deeply as he could, trying to take in what fresh air the grate had to offer. Still no sounds of her. He looked down at his mudcovered body and scared himself to see how fast he was breathing. He listened hard to the silence, peering first into the blackness from where he had come, then into the blackness where he would have to go.

Still no sound. "Maybe she's gone," he thought. "That's it. My yelling scared her back to her cellar. . . ." He listened again. Nothing. Then he heard it. It sounded like two words, very low, like an echo coming out of nowhere, and then again, this time louder but still soft, he could hear the words, "Nay—thon . . . Nay—thon . . ." Sounding like a sad, sad song. It was getting louder, or closer, Nathan couldn't tell. "Nay—thon . . . Nay—ay—thon," and then, "Neh heh heh heh!"

Nathan ducked low and ran back into the blackness. Without the flashlight it was like running with your eyes closed. The mud continued to tug at his feet, cobwebs clung to his mouth, choking him as he ran. His legs ached, threatened to give out with every stride. His back hurt with each jolt and his lungs felt as if they would burst, but still he pushed himself faster and faster. Something caught his foot and he went down sharply on one knee, the mud giving way so the concrete floor bit deeply into his skin. He rolled over and looked back just in time to see a hunched-over form fly through the dim light under the grate and then become a shadow, lumbering closer and closer, gaining on him all the time. He scrambled to his feet again and dived on into the darkness. "Less than a block," he kept telling himself. "I'm almost to The Crick." "Neh heh heh heh" came again and again down the sewer, the sound reaching for his neck, pulling at his mind, trying to drag him down. He couldn't hold back any more and started crying, gasping and weeping at the same time as he stumbled his way through the dark. Finally the dim light appeared in front of him—the opening! The Crick! The outside!

The shadow behind him wasn't gaining any more. By the sloshing sounds and heavy breathing it must have been as tired from the chase as Nathan. The light grew brighter and brighter, he could make out the entire opening now. He could see The Crick outside, getting closer and closer with each step. Nathan pushed even harder and then flew out of the sewer like a rock from a slingshot. He automatically shielded his eyes from the sudden daylight, straightened up, threw his head back, and sucked in the fresh air through his tears. He could hear heavy breathing and splashing footsteps coming after him, closer and closer, louder with each splash. Glancing up and down The Crick, Nathan saw the rock crawl-way and headed across the tiles toward it. Slipping but not falling, he reached the first handholds as the breathing and the foot-splashing became louder and louder. His muddied toes slipped once, twice, and finally took hold in the crack in the stone wall, but between the crying and the

running and the falling, he was too weak to pull himself up any farther. The foot-splashing was out of the sewer now and directly below him. Nathan used all of his remaining strength, and started pulling himself slowly, ever so slowly upward, up out of The Crick. Upward and upward his body crept toward the next handhold, his fingers just inches away, clawing, clawing, when he felt a cold slimy hand clamp hard onto his bare leg from down below.

"Gotcha!"

Nathan clung to the wall, too exhausted to pull himself free, too terrified to let himself back down to what was waiting for him below. His strength was gone. He forced himself to look back down over his shoulder to see what held him so tightly. There, beneath him on the tiles, covered with mud and filth and carrying a flashlight, was Terry, with the kind of grin on his face that Nathan didn't like one bit. "Gotcha, Nathan," he laughed, "and man, did I get you!" Terry let go of Nathan's leg, set his flashlight down, and went to the water's edge. Nathan let himself down slowly, then plopped down on a rock, staring at Terry and too numb to speak. "Whew, what a mess," Terry said, washing his arms in the pool of The Crick. "But even if Irv whips me, it was worth it. You should have seen your face," and Terry laughed a tired laugh. Nathan sat catching his breath. He looked at how muddy he was, then over at Terry's flashlight, then at Terry. The blood didn't look so much like blood in the daylight and Nathan noticed as Terry washed it off his arms, it came off clean, with no cuts or gashes on Terry at all. It was all beginning to sink in on Nathan. "Terry, you didn't—"

"I sure did," said Terry, the tired grin still there. "It was great!" Terry was excited over his victory and wanted to enjoy it a little longer. "What scared you the most, Nathan? The ketchup I poured all over myself, or my howls? I thought my howls were pretty good. Or was it the secret passageway? I was afraid you'd see it was a dead end—but you were too busy to even look."

"I knew there wasn't any secret passageway."

"Sure you did, Nathan. Sure you did." Terry laughed quietly to himself as he remembered something else. "You know, you almost kicked my flashlight when you were trying to get me to stand up. I thought for a while you weren't going to fall for it, that you'd turn chicken and go back out. But it turned out better than I ever expected. God, I'd give anything to see you screaming bloody murder out of that sewer grate again. I

couldn't stop from laughing, I almost gave it away." And thinking about laughing made Terry laugh again.

Nathan felt the anger building up inside him. The thought of pushing Terry into The Crick crossed his mind, but he was too tired for a fight.

"Say something, Nathan."

"Why should I? All you'll do is laugh."

"Why not, Nathan? That's what jokes are for!" Terry went on, flicking his hands to dry the crick water off them. "It's no different from the Fake Push or when you threw the crawdad at me."

Nathan got up slowly and climbed up out of The Crick. When he reached the top he looked down at Terry. "A joke? You call that a joke? That was a *crappy* thing to do, Terry. And you're a bastard for doing it!"

"Ah, come on, Nathan, don't get mad. A joke's a joke. Remember what you always say. You got to admit, Nathan, it *was* funny."

"It was still a crappy thing to do," and Nathan turned and headed home. The last thing Nathan heard from The Crick was Terry's voice, high and squeaky, going "Neh heh heh heh" and then breaking out laughing in his own laugh.

Nathan walked home slowly, his head held down, his eyes watching his feet and the pavement. The hot asphalt didn't bother him, he didn't have the time for that. He kept going over and over in his mind what had happened in the sewer. "My little sewer rat!" he mocked and had to smile a little to himself. By the time he reached the corner he guessed he probably did look pretty funny screaming up out of a sewer. He felt his energy coming back. Nathan stopped in front of The-House-With-No-Men and there was the old lady in her wheelchair, still sitting in the same place, still staring out across the porch. He couldn't tell if she was looking at him or not. Then he decided she must be. To think that he had thought this old woman had been chasing him through the sewer made him smile and he waved up at her. She smiled back and nodded her head towards him the way old people do. He turned towards his house wondering how he would get cleaned up without his parents finding out. "That bastard probably got me grounded for a month," he thought to himself. "But I got to admit, it was *kind* of funny."

What made Marge
burn the toast
and miss her favorite
soap opera?



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Dick Flinders hadn't forgotten that she'd always meant to leave a clue. But, after all, she'd only fallen. . . .

AND DOWN SHE LAY



In four moments his face resembled a section of cliff with frozen water trapped in a couple of crannies, reflecting an unpromising sky—those were the eyes. Nobody had ever accused Detective-sergeant Dick Flinders of being an impressionable man.

Yet he liked Mary Taylor a lot, from the instant of meeting her, and eventually—on his side, at least—it went far beyond that. Secretly, Flinders thought her beautiful, though Mrs. Taylor was no great beauty.

She had the face of a Renaissance madonna, twenty years on, more than a touch overweight, who had lived through some hard times. She was a no-nonsense woman who generally wore flat shoes, crumpled pants and sweater, and a camelcloth coat with a faintly mangy air, because its raised seams showed threadbare places. At the same time, Mary Taylor managed to be intensely feminine.

Operation Nail ran for months, so Flinders and Detective-sergeant Taylor spent a total of days together.

From time to time a criminal gets target status, to be watched around the clock, his life analyzed in finest detail, every human contact logged and checked out, so that a picture of his activities can be built up. The subject of Operation Nail presented extra problems because he had one or more bent coppers on his payroll for the sole purpose of warning him about such interest. The special force recruited for Nail, therefore, was gathered by stealth and assembled under subterfuge, from all over the Metropolitan Police area.

Dick Flinders, for instance, left Rosetta Street nick on extended sick leave. As usual, he said nothing about it, but somebody left a confidential letter on the wrong desk, and it soon became public knowledge that a patch had been discovered on his lung; he was going to stay with relatives at the seaside and wouldn't be back for a long time. Mary Taylor was sent to a pilot course in social studies at a Midlands university, and so it went for the thirty or more members of the team.

You can do a lot of talking, while watching. Dick Flinders, of course, was more of a listener. And that was a rainy summer, even for England. Afterwards, Flinders' mental pictures of Mary were of sitting with her in a string of drab cars and anonymous pickups and light trucks, with worm and amoeba patterns of rain on the window behind her profile.

She was a great one for poetry, the older, unfashionable kind that rhymes and scans. She could recite more than Flinders had ever bothered to read, and Tennyson was her favorite. Mary reeled off even the longer poems with only occasional pauses, as if telling a story. He never minded when she repeated them, and the couplets, drawing extra potency from their speaker, sank into his subconscious, ripe for retrieval.

And she talked about her youth, the sky-wide fields of Wiltshire where tractors work in threes and fours and racehorses exercise on the emerald, frozen waves of downland hills. The recollections stopped around her twentieth birthday.

Flinders gathered or guessed that her marriage, while enduring—she wasn't the kind to break a contract—wasn't a success.

Naturally, they also talked shop by the hour. At the time of Operation Nail, a Detective-constable had been murdered at Rotherhithe. He was a man with a heavy caseload and an even heavier list of enemies, so there were many suspects.

"I'd always leave a clue," said Mary Taylor.

"Chances are it would be a fine thing. Ted Perry had other things on his mind, poor sod. They ran him down with a five-ton truck, luv—there wasn't time for a dying deposition."

She shook her head. "There's ways, Dick. I bet I'd find one." Mary could be very certain about professional matters, or pigheaded, if you wanted to be unkind.

There was a big celebration when Operation Nail, having run like clockwork, delivered like a fruit machine. Detective-sergeant Flinders, impassive as ever, was probably the only officer involved who felt sad.

He and Mary slipped away from the pub after the third hour of euphoria. Inspector Flaxman, who was that sort, was showing people an Operation Nail tie he had designed. Superintendent Jelliffe, primmest and stuffiest of coppers, was wearing a lampshade.

"I'll run you home," Flinders offered. Mary Taylor lived on the Kent side of London, not many miles beyond Rosetta Street and his lodgings.

She shook her head. "Not a good idea. Well, is it?"

Flinders found a kind of eloquence. "Probably be years before we get together again. I think the world of you, gel. Your circumstances may change; mine won't, there aren't any. So if you ever want to get in touch, you know where I am."

"You're a gentleman, Dick."

"Oh-aye, one of nature's," he scoffed, glad to lighten the atmosphere.

Mary Taylor always said what she meant, and took mild exception when others fell short of that. "Just a gentleman." Her stubby, worn, and capable hand, a moth in the darkness of the car park, came up and settled on his shoulder and squeezed hard for a moment. "You look after yourself."

Then she turned up the collar of the disreputable coat, freeing her hair with an abrupt shake of the head that put him in mind of a pony, yanked the belt tighter, and trudged off to the bus stop.

It was the last he saw of her. But two years afterwards, he heard about

Detective-sergeant Mary Taylor.

"What exactly is your interest, sergeant?" Inspector Mockridge returned Flinders' warrant card and leaned back behind his desk, a man with the deceptive, florid jollity of high blood pressure and a short temper.

"I worked with DS Taylor on a target thing, backalong. And being in the neighborhood anyway, sir, I wanted to know what happened. Maybe I can call on the family."

"There isn't one to speak of," Mockridge countered promptly. "Just Mr. Taylor, and I've already seen him. There are procedures for an, um, unhappy matter like this, sergeant. All being taken care of. Mr. Taylor never liked his wife's career, he's upset, and he won't take kindly to a stream of coppers banging at his door."

The big man waited woodenly.

Inspector Mockridge, spying a corner of newspaper protruding from the trenchcoat pocket, smiled narrowly. "You ought to know better, taking any notice of the papers. Typical media distortion. There's no mystery about Taylor's death: she was spring cleaning and fell off a chair, broke her neck."

Mockridge's smile grew a fraction malicious. "Not the domesticated type, DS Taylor—didn't like women's work."

"Thanks, sir. I'll be on my way, then." But Detective-sergeant Flinders did not travel far.

"Oh, you're in order, Dick." Sergeant Rollason, bluff, sandy, matter-of-fact, nodded to himself. "One of our lot dies with their boots on, you start thinking the worst."

Flinders had waited three hours in the Bull & Mouth, sipping light ale at an unvarying rate of a pint every sixty-five minutes, to encounter Rollason. The Bull wasn't the nearest pub to Caldwell Green police station, just the best. And Dick Flinders had been around for a long time; it wasn't such a long chance, having served with Cyril Rollason ten years earlier.

Rollason, a raincoat over his uniform, lit a cigarette. "Mary wasn't that popular, she didn't bow and scrape the way some people like. But she was a bloody good copper. I'll miss her."

Flinders felt a stab of jealousy at the other man's easy use of her name, and told himself not to be daft.

Sergeant Rollason's gaze was steady through the smoke. "What's all this about, son?"

Flinders spoke to his clasped hands. "There was never any monkey-business, Mary wasn't the kind. But she's the one I'll measure all the others against, until I'm in my long box. Pick of the litter, was Mary."

"Ah," said Rollason. "Well, amen to that, she *was* a bit special. Even if everybody didn't see it. What d'you want to know, Dick?"

"Everything."

Rollason took a measured gulp of whisky and ginger wine, smacked his lips, and nodded again. "Fair enough. You know her old man's a right cupful of cold spit, no use to man nor beast?"

Curling his right hand around a phantom glass, Cyril Rollason agitated it violently. "Too much of that. He'd gone on the spree, Mary went home off late duty, that'd be around half past ten last night. Neighbor saw the lights still on this morning, knocked, peeped in the downstairs window, saw her laid out on the floor, and called us."

"Mockridge said something about spring cleaning."

"Cobblers," Rollason retorted. "Mocky's got a thing about working women copping out from their rightful destiny of being unpaid bloody servants, that's all." Dick Flinders remembered that Rollason's wife, to her husband's ungrudging pride, was a doctor.

"No, she was tired," the uniformed man said harshly. "Probably steaming mad as well, with her old man off drinking and whoring as per usual. The light bulb had burnt out, in the front room. A chair was lying on its side—the linoleum floor's pretty slippery."

"Poor Mary got up on a chair, people will do it, to change the bulb, and over she went. If you stop to think how dangerous a house is, you'd take to living in tents."

"He *was* off drinking and whoring?"

"Yeah," Rollason grimaced. "Mocky Mockridge found our Mr. Taylor at a house three streets away, later this morning. In bed with a bird who's mislaid her own husband. Her mother says Taylor and the woman rolled in, legless with drink, about half past nine, and never stirred from the bed where Mocky found 'em. Ain't romance wonderful?"

"Just an accident, then," Flinders observed stonily.

"Looks that way. What am I saying? It was."

"Maybe. What was Mary working on?"

Rollason, about to finish his drink, replaced the tumbler with finicky

care. "Hold very hard now, son."

Flinders shook his head. "Just for talking's sake, what was she up to in the last couple of weeks?"

Sergeant Rollason started to say something, changed his mind, drummed his fingers on the table. "How would I know? Woodentops, the CID calls us, Noddy-cops, figures of fun. They don't confide, is what I'm saying."

Then he did have the drink. "All right, I could find out." Eerily, Sergeant Rollason echoed Mary Taylor: "Not a good idea, though. You're way off your patch, in every sense of the word. And Mocky's a stickler for The Book; he'll have your courting-tackle for a paperweight if he catches you trying to interfere."

Flinders nodded. "I'll ring you at home, first thing tomorrow. Best time to snoop around a nick, when the shifts have just changed."

Rollason sighed heavily. "Anything else?"

"Of course. Give my best to Helen. And tell me who's the pathologist."

"Professor Craigie, remember him?"

"You're joking. What's more, he'll remember me. I got his car back for him once, on the quiet. It'd been nicked outside the wrong block of flats, if you get my drift."

Liam Craigie, called out from a bridge session at his West End club, didn't ask what Flinders' interest was. A man with a long memory for favors, he simply passed on information.

"If it's any consolation, Richard, your friend didn't suffer long, if at all. She did not die at once, but she would have been unconscious or feeling no pain, throughout. The crucial event occurred and was over in a split second."

"Good. Least she deserved. And it was an accident?"

Some Scots speak the purest English in the British Isles, as measured as their minds. Professor Craigie sounded old-maidish. "I'm a . . . technician who, by the very nature of my calling, must eschew certainties. Accidental death? Very probably; there's hardly any reason to think otherwise."

Dick Flinders pounced on the qualification. "Where does 'hardly any' come in, prof?"

Craigie, seeing friends arriving, drew the policeman into a corner of the draughtboard-tiled foyer where a telephone box carpentered in the early 1900's cast a pool of gloom for confidential talk.

"There were no injuries inconsistent with a fall—just the one, massive injury, in fact. But there was one worrying little abrasion."

The pathologist clenched his right hand and tapped the edge of it with a bony left forefinger. "Just there, below the fourth, smallest finger. A cut inflicted immediately prior to death."

"Defense wound?"

Craigie pursed his lips. "No, no. Just the one minor nick. Some domestic mishap. Rather supporting the presumption of a woman who was tired and careless, accident prone, to use jargon. Except that it was in an odd position: as if she used the side of her hand like a hammer. Not on bone or tissue, and not in a conventional punch, else the knuckles would have been the affected area. D'you follow?"

Dick Flinders tried to visualize that small, cryptic cut. "A karate chop, edge of her hand?"

Professor Craigie was definite. "No, the abrasion's trifling but it extends from the edge of the palm onto the side of the little finger. Ergo, that finger was curled—with the rest, most likely. Extend three fingers stiffly while curling the smallest and you'll understand: it's a strain, not natural."

He shrugged almost whimsically. "We're discussing a shallow cut less than an inch long. It wouldn't have caused discomfort, to any degree. Her hands were quite rough, she would hardly notice it."

John Taylor had the indefinably sodden looking, drowned-strawberry nose of the dedicated toper, and spectacularly bloodshot eyes. They squeezed shut and he groaned at the assault of light at seven thirty A.M. "What's your game?" he croaked belatedly, for Dick Flinders was across the threshold by then.

"Hide and seek. Listen, sunshine, I'm in a hurry and I don't want trouble—neither do you. This won't take long."

Flinders opened the door to the right of the pinched hall. "This where it happened?" It had to be: dark linoleum, straight-backed chairs, a central, hanging light with the bulb still showing blackened and dead.

"What if it is? You one of them reporters?"

"Maybe." Flinders turned slowly, like a gun turret on a battleship, examining everything. A seldom-used room in a loveless house. Framed photographs over the fireplace—wedding group, an elderly couple outside a farmhouse, a far younger John Taylor smirking and in uniform as a National Service private in the Catering Corps.

Flinders' arm came up in one piece, like a railway signal. A large oval of unfaded wallpaper.

"Who took the picture down?"

"Mirror, not picture, Mr Knowall," Taylor replied sulkily. "She broke it. She might have been a woman copper, ordering folk around and stirring up trouble, but she was a dead loss around the house.

"Rotten temper, too. Lash out, she would, when she was in the mood. Between being clumsy, and wanton bloody destruction . . ."

Dick Flinders counted back from ten, silently. "She broke it . . . the night it happened?"

Puzzled by the big fellow's interest, Taylor closed his eyes and lounged against the door frame. "Yes, it was all right in the afternoon, I used it to straighten my tie. First thing I spotted; well, the main thing was Mare snuffing it, goes without saying!" The grieving widower sniggered and wagged his head.

Flinders went out through a kitchen already smelly, sink piled with dirty crocks, to the back doorstep. The mirror was propped beside the dustbin, its heavy chain starting to rust from drizzle and dew.

Its wooden backing had stopped its breaking outright, but the egg-shaped glass was cracked down the middle. Flinders curled his fingers and swung his hand against the silvery surface, gingerly. He felt the dangerous kiss of the razor edge where one half of the glass was higher at the fracture line.

Mary Taylor had used her hand like a hammer, Professor Craigie believed.

"Seven years' bad luck," Taylor jeered from the back doorstep. "Who are you, anyway?"

Flinders brushed past him without answering. Taylor was shouting by the time he was in the hall, but the slammed front door cut it off.

"Two weeks' leave, just like that." Inspector Tuckey wagged his head wonderingly. "And here's me boosting you up all these years as the steadiest bloke between Rosetta Street and the North Pole."

Detective-sergeant Flinders rubbed his nose. "Male menopause," he suggested helpfully.

"Don't get saucy as well as awkward. All right then, seeing as it's you. And watch your step."

Flinders blinked at him. Either Cyril Rollason had been indiscreet and

set the grapevine quivering, or Tuckey, a master of the art, was firing shots at random.

"I always do, Skip. And thanks."

Flinders put the scribbled notes away as Miss Angel came to the public library counter. He'd been studying them all morning.

Roger James Endaby, age 37, general dealer. Suspected receiver of stolen goods. Mary Taylor had been keeping observation on his scrapyard.

Gladys Manley Gray, age 23, prostitute. Had jumped bail at the beginning of the month after being sent for trial, accused of robbing a client. Mary knew her well and had traced her on a previous, similar occasion. She'd been expected to do so again, given time.

George Philip Trench, age 56, suspected of Value-Added Tax evasion on a large scale. Mary Taylor was working, gently and as a long-term project, on persuading his bookkeeper to turn Queen's Evidence and escape punishment as a result.

Detective-sergeant Mary Taylor had been involved in many other matters, of course. Police work, as the instructors din into recruits and probationers, is teamwork. It had taken Sergeant Rollason more than ten minutes just to dictate the relevant names and add thumbnail dossiers.

But those three, said Rollason—and Flinders agreed—were "the live ones." Endaby, the fence, had a violent record and an understandable aversion, after much experience, to prison. Gladys Gray was on speed and might have reacted strongly to attempted arrest. Trench was the least likely, on the face of it, but with so much money and ruin involved, could not be counted out.

"Hang on," Rollason sighed, his roster completed, "Helen wants a word. Words, more like."

Helen Rollason said in a rush, "I don't care if you do hang up on me, Dickie Flinders! Mary *was* an exceptional person. Her death didn't have to be, though. You'd better be very sure you *do* have a hunch, not just the instinct to make this thing dramatic because you're emotionally involved."

"I'm not an insensitive fool, I know what I'm saying. Bereavement has messed up the heads of far more stoical and brainy guys than you, luv."

An anxious silence at Helen's end of the line. Then Flinders said: "I wouldn't hang up on you. You're in order, dear, but I know what I'm talking about, too. Not to worry, we'll all meet up and have one of our

curry festivals when this thing's sorted."

Walking to the library, Flinders had wondered at himself. He didn't hold with ghosts, ESP, premonitions, and the like. Sentimentality irked him like silver foil on an exposed dental nerve.

Yet the night Mary Taylor died, he had been swept by a sense of desolation and worry that shook him. Depression can be a clinical condition as well as a passing fit of the blues, and Flinders had feared he was experiencing its onset.

The news about Mary had explained that feeling. Somehow, he could discount any idea of the supernatural and still be sure, without the least factual foundation, that she had been killed and he had to do something about it.

Miss Angel's tart speech hauled him back to the present. "Escaping from the rain, or looking for an ethnic minority member to oppress?" She had suspiciously emphatic black hair, snapping blue eyes, and an abiding disapproval of the police, who, she had often explained to Detective-sergeant Flinders, were minions of the boss class and mercenaries of anti-life, neo-colonial interests. Despite this, they were firm friends.

Flinders said humbly, "I need help. There's a poem about a broken mirror, and that's all I know."

Miss Angel scratched her head, like a very poor actress signalling puzzlement to an audience seated perhaps a hundred yards away. "Goodness! *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is your best bet, fat blue joker, bottom shelf, third stack along, in Reference."

"I don't know the title."

She curled her upper lip. "What a moron. That's the idea of the book, dear boy. The index has key words. Listed alphabetically, that means M-for-mirror will be a long way past A-for-apple."

He was turning away when she made his scalp tingle. "The mirror crack'd from side to side," Miss Angel announced. Startled by his blazing glance, she added lamely, "Well, it's only an Agatha Christie whodunit. I never read them; too class-conscious, and I detest violence."

"That wasn't it. This was a poem."

He found what he wanted in the seventh item on page 354 of the dictionary, one of a score or more devoted to extracts from Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

Reading "The Lady of Shalott," Flinders found his eyes blurring and he had to stop, blowing his nose and clearing his throat sternly. Mary

Taylor's chanting with its warm Wessex drawl resurfacing as she slipped back towards childhood days in something remembered from them was so clear in his head that the ache of her passing was all the harder to take.

Soon the grief was backed by disappointment. The dictionary gave large sections, but he hunted up a battered, stale-smelling *Complete Works* to read the whole poem and make sure. The lady in her tower, the water meadows, the handsome knight, the shattering of mirror and spell, Sir Lancelot's epitaph while gazing on the stricken maiden . . .

None of it made any sense. Flinders slammed the book shut, making several readers jump at the pistol shot.

To hell with Camelot, he decided savagely. Mary Taylor had died at far-from-idyllic Caldwell Green, and that was where he must search.

Dick Flinders, leaning against a lamp post, told himself that Mary must have stood at this spot, trod this same sidewalk, only a few days ago.

Suddenly he yearned for her to come walking around the corner, head down, cuffs of the shabby blue pants swirling. Just so that he could tell her . . . what? Nothing to do with his feelings, or not directly. Just to be careful.

Detective-sergeant Taylor had been ambitious, and believed—rightly as it happened—that a common police trick of borrowing lower colleagues' brainwork and passing it off as your own was sharpened in her case by sexual discrimination. So she tended to hoard insights and discoveries until an ironclad conclusion could be presented, firmly attributable to herself and delivered in front of several senior figures. Preferably ones who disliked each other and would be ruthless over demolishing a rival's false claims.

Flinders had seen minor instances of her technique during Operation Nail. She hadn't changed, and very likely it had been the death of her.

Shaking off the sterile reverie, Flinders stared across the road. Roger Endaby's yard was rather well camouflaged, shoehorned into an unexpected gap in a row of small, Edwardian-era row houses. The policeman guessed that one of them had been demolished by bombing in the 1940's blitz, and never rebuilt. London is pitted with such tiny and generally squalid sites in places where they shouldn't be.

There was no sign on the blistered door set in an extra-tall, uninformative fence. Walking to the end of the row, turning right and immediately right again, Flinders made his way to the rear of Endaby's secretive

little property. Again the fence, with two strands of barbed wire topping it for good measure.

Over the way was a small block of concrete garages in a sawtooth formation offering good cover after dark. Wandering along them, Flinders came across a niche strewn with toffee papers and the trodden-out corpses of Gauloise cigarettes smoked for only the initial inch or so.

Mary had waited and watched from here, and not just the once.

Dick Flinders turned away abruptly, returning to the Consort Street side of Endaby's yard. Peering through the crack between gate and fence, he saw tea chests apparently full of scraps of copper and lead piping, cartons of empty jars, several old pedal-bikes. A garden shed at the far end must be where Roger Endaby made his deals and kept his accounts, if any.

There was a white car off to one side, only partly visible. Covered in a plastic sheet, but not completely. He could see the number plate of a vehicle registered new, in the past two months, and was able to identify a Mercedes costing enough to pay the yard's annual rent several times over.

"There's a funny motor for a poor but honest rag-and-bone man," Flinders mumbled. He moved to the other side of the solid gate, in case the crack was wider at the hinges.

"He's not around."

Flinders looked about, without reward until the voice came again. "The one above sees all." The young man in dark pants and white shirt with rolled sleeves, was perched in the bay window of the row house next to Endaby's yard. He had a snub nose, a friendly grin, and was eating toast and butter and honey. Pop music floated out from behind him.

"Rog went off to Derby last night," the youngster explained. "Anyway, that's what he told me—so he's probably in Cornwall. He's a terrible old crook, is Rog."

Flinders spread his hands and returned the grin. "That's what I heard. But I need him pretty urgently," he lied.

"Come on up a minute, the door's open, I'm the top flat." The young man pulled his head inside.

"Quite a place you've got here," said Flinders, having shaken hands with the tenant, Dennis Webb. He wasn't flattering a probable source of information; the flat was surprisingly luxurious compared to the modest exterior of the street. Waxed boards with good rugs, some expensive

paintings—expensive looking, anyway, though they must be reproductions—and half a wall of stereo equipment.

Dennis Webb made the usual English incoherent noise for acknowledging a compliment. "Well, these places are dirt cheap, no parking space with 'em. Doesn't matter because I'm not here long enough to need a car, and when I do, I can always hire one."

He jerked a thumb at a cluster of dolls on the mantelpiece, mostly in outlandish costumes. "I'm with Allworld Airlines, I bring one of those back for every new country we get to. As for the rest, my family's motto is, 'I can get it for you wholesale . . . ' and I hold them to it!"

Webb shrugged meaninglessly and bounded out to the kitchen. "Coffee?" he said.

Flinders wondered what had brought on the hospitality. Young Dennis might be gay, of course, but Flinders didn't believe so; even less did he believe in his own power as a charmer.

Returning with two steaming mugs, Dennis Webb explained the trivial riddle. "You mustn't take it seriously, what I was saying about Rog. Just my fun. He's a good bloke." Webb giggled helplessly. "Except, of course, for being a miserable sod with the devil of a temper. So if you're a mate of his, forget anything I blurted out to the contrary."

Drifting to the bay window, Flinders said, "I've never clapped eyes on him. Matter of fact, he owes me money, through a third party." As he had hoped, there was a much better view of the yard.

"Don't hold your breath waiting for it," Webb advised cheerfully. Slurping coffee, he chattered on. "I'm not a pilot or anything, mind. Except when I'm trying to pull birds. Steward, what the Yanks call a flight attendant. Bit of a come-down, really."

Obviously he was referring to a medley of photographs encased in a transparent plastic block at Flinders' elbow. Also obviously, Dennis Webb was fond of and impressed by Dennis Webb. All the pictures were of him, variously dressed in swimming trunks, football kit, a white pajama-like outfit, track suit, or Air Training Corps uniform, and invariably flourishing a trophy cup or shield.

"Interesting job," Flinders commented abstractedly. He was trying to make out what kind of lock-secured Roger Endaby's office-shack.

Young Webb was a shade patronizing. "It's all right until I get rid of the flying and travel bug at Allworld's expense. But the prospects aren't good if you're like me and flunked pilot training."

Neatly, he snared the policeman's empty mug—the coffee had been excellent—and took it with the other to the kitchen. "Like I said, I'm only here off and on . . . but d'you want me to give Rog a message if I see him?" he called.

Evidently Dennis Webb's hospitable impulse was withering rapidly, now that he'd offset his blunder in slandering Endaby. Flinders took the hint.

"Ta for the coffee, Dennis. Yes, say Bill Tilden of Dagenham is after him. Tilden Plant Hire, that'll ring a bell." Which was unlikely, since he'd invented name, home town, and business on the spur of the moment.

Dick Flinders woke up in the middle of the night. His temple ached slightly, but he wasn't sure whether that had roused him. Gladys Gray's pimp had taken violent exception to even discreet enquiries about the missing prostitute's location; Flinders had slipped the punch without quite escaping it, and had nearly broken his left hand, returning the blow with interest.

He switched on the light, opening the Tennyson anthology he'd found in a secondhand bookshop.

Reading and marvelling over "The Lady of Shalott," abruptly he knew that Mary Taylor had been clever and brave and in the oddest way, lucky. Or perhaps providence had decreed that the message she needed to leave matched the words of a poet dead for nearly a century. Brave above all though, he thought, eyelids stinging. For she must have made the connection within moments of death darting at her, lethal hand cocked for that single blow. . . .

The odds against anyone's understanding her symbol were enormous, but Mary wouldn't have cared. She had said she would leave a clue and had kept her promise.

There was no hurry now, and his man was out of town, anyway. Flinders spent a scholarly day checking records of births and deaths. He took a long train journey, returning with a revolver and six rounds of ammunition, bought from a man who'd spent years under the illusion that Flinders didn't know about him.

Eventually it was time, and he drove out to Heathrow. The quarry he picked up there took a taxi for the first few miles before alighting, strolling down a side street where parking was not restricted, and getting into a

shiny new Mercedes. He drove straight to Roger Endaby's place of business, unlocked the gate, and maneuvered the Merc through.

Flinders, having passed him at Chiswick, sprinted across Consort Street and was inside the yard almost as soon as the driver got out.

Dennis Webb gasped as the muzzle of the .38 found a snug home against his neck. But staring at Flinders, he didn't ask what this was all about.

*She left the web, she left the loom . . .
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side.*

All there in the poem, and whether you spelt it with one or two b's, it sounded the same. The Webb whom Mary Taylor had indicted even flew wide, floating in DC-10's around the world.

It was fanciful and outrageous, too great a leap and too fragile a bridge of reasoning—Dick Flinders considered—only if one was willing to believe that Mary Taylor had smashed the mirror for no reason at all.

And there was more, as soon as the poem meshed with his mind. Dennis Webb, so full of himself, yet anxious to play down his possessions. He had no family who got things at wholesale rates; he was an only child and his parents, never well off, were long since dead.

Then there was the flat, with no parking space, and the Merc kept next door. Not Roger Endaby's, for he had been away on business, in his own, far more modest, personal transport. The vehicle registry computer at Swansea in Wales had identified Dennis Webb as the Mercedes' owner.

Webb, so eager to learn more about anyone snooping near the yard next door—and his car—guilt would persuade him. Dennis Webb, the all-round athlete who had won a prize for judo . . .

A fairly low-paid, professional traveller with too high a lifestyle had to have a racket. Smuggling, no doubt. Put the same person near a suddenly-dead detective, and you were looking at a viable suspect.

"How'd she rumble you, Dennis?"

Webb laughed shakily and planted his palms on the side of the car. "She never did. It was me shooting my mouth off, stupid bastard."

He sniffed childishly. "Oh, I can make money but my luck's always been bloody rotten."

Flinders came close to killing him then. The self pity was enraging.

Webb's hands squeaked faintly on the metal. He pulled himself to-

gether. "She was hanging around too often. I did this long haul, stopover in Sydney, Australia, and she was still here when I got back.

"So I chatted her, like I did you. We even had a drink at that pub on the corner. She slung me a load of bull about her daughter being pregnant; reckoned she was trying to trace the bloke and he worked round here.

"Well, I followed her, she went to Caldwell Green nick. It was killing me. Anyway, I followed her back home that night, went in. Trying to talk a deal, cut her in if it wasn't too late, if she kept her trap shut."

His expression turned bitter. "She let me hang myself, then she said she'd been after Rog Endaby all the time, but I'd do for a bonus.

"I went for her, she ran, must've been crazy with fear. Broke the mirror on the wall for no reason. I clobbered her, made it look like an accident."

Flinders exhaled slowly. "What've you been running in on those flights of yours?"

"Coke. Not much, not often, but you don't have to and you still make a bomb. None this time—once bitten, twice shy." Webb shivered again and added, with little hope, "Listen, we could go partners."

"Maybe. Who d'you sell to?"

"Two or three blokes. I told you, I don't bring that much. If you want the main man, there isn't one." Webb's truthfulness was plain. "I just go round the clubs, two or three times a year."

Flinders stepped back a pace. "That's it, then." The pistol came up. Just as he realized that he wasn't going to squeeze the trigger, Dennis Webb screamed and flung himself sideways and dashed out of the yard.

Brakes yowled in agony, there was a hideous sound of impact and dragging. Dick Flinders put the revolver in his pocket and walked to the gate without showing himself. A truck was slewed across Consort Street at an angle, fender and grille damaged, windshield milky and collapsing onto the hood in countless grains. Dennis Webb's body was in the gutter nearby. He wasn't bleeding much. His head was against the curb at an impossible angle, suggesting that the neck was snapped.

*"God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."*

"Was it worth it?" Inspector Tuckey asked sourly when Detective-sergeant Flinders returned to duty, some days later. "The leave, was it all right?"

Flinders was expressionless. "I suppose I've had worse," he said.

The city's sports reporters thought they had a winning team to cover. That was good but that was all. Until one summer evening when what they had, instead, was . . .

THE CASE OF THE DEAD CENTER FIELDER



by E.E.
AYDELOTTE

When you die you're just dead, that's all. Nothingness. Things stop. Mel Kolkie was as dead as anyone ever gets.

I cover our city's major league baseball team, the Mustangs. As long as anyone can remember they have occupied what we scribes call "the lower division" of the standings. The Mustangs have fielded an endless succession of bricks, buffoons, and chumps. It is enough to drive the

team's manager to drink (and did to several of them).

My name is Billy Wilson and I'm a sports writer for the *Star-News*. What I *want* to be is a sports columnist. The difference between the two is that a sports writer is tied like an indentured servant to the particular home team whose sport is then in season, while a sports columnist is free to write about any sports topic he chooses.

A columnist gets to express his opinion instead of merely reporting the plays and the scores. And if a columnist is *really* good he can end up being syndicated.

Money, fame, and a leg up in the world, that's what a column would mean to me.

But I'm stuck here as a sports writer. I stay in my rut and perform my duties. My friends pester me for free tickets to games. My friends consult me regarding their bets. "Good old Billy" I'm known as.

If I were a columnist I'd pick my own stories. For instance: Sam Brozinski. His is a rags-to-riches tale mixed in with a big dose of Simon Legree.

Sam Brozinski is the owner of the Mustangs. Years ago as a penniless young man Sam worked as a research chemist. He formed a partnership with two other chemists and they eventually developed a new form of plastic that (I'm told) is perfect for molding artificial heart valves. They should all have become rich from this discovery.

But only Sam Brozinski got rich. The patent was taken out only in Sam's name. The two partners ended up on salary and Sam ended up a millionaire.

Sam runs the Mustangs like he runs his plastics company. His team usually has the lowest payroll in either league. Sam discovered long ago, that with TV revenues and the league's other money-sharing schemes his team needed to be only minimally competitive to return a profit to him. To Sam a good team means many underpaid young players, many underpaid rookies and very few veterans. I actually think Sam dreads a championship: it would mean raises for his players.

Of course Sam has to humor the fans, so publicly he maintains the fiction that his team is trying to win, is trying to improve. He talks of "developing" the young players. Sam is constantly hiring and firing his managers; their firings are usually accompanied by Sam's public blame-laying.

Well, shoot, it isn't the managers' fault. They generally have had to

field a bunch of reprobates masquerading as players.

Except for Mel Kolkie. Now *he* was something else.

Mel was the best center fielder I ever saw play baseball. How the Mustangs discovered him I'll never know. Normally their scouts couldn't tell a lefthanded pitcher from a retired traffic cop.

I remember him the spring he came up to the big club: fast as a deer, reflexes like Ali in his prime, and skinny as a starving greyhound. He was a nice guy, too; I never once saw him refuse a writer's interview or a fan's autograph.

Mel didn't change during the eight years he played for the Mustangs. Oh, he filled out a bit in his late twenties like anyone will, but for Mel filling out meant he only looked hungry instead of starved.

Mel was famous nationwide, partially from his baseball ability (he was the Mustangs' only All-Star) and mostly from his familiar TV commercials for the Diabetes Research Foundation. Mel Kolkie was a diabetic; before and after every game he gave himself an insulin shot. He was not at all self-conscious about this and he freely answered reporters' (or fans') questions regarding it. Quite a lot of money had been raised for diabetes research because of Mel Kolkie. He was that type of guy.

Mel was the one player Sam Brozinski couldn't trade. Not that Sam didn't have good offers from teams in both leagues. Sam couldn't trade him because if he had there would have been a fan revolution in our city. Mel Kolkie was that popular; he *was* the Mustangs.

Sam kept him at a pretty low salary (considering his value) for six years. Then a high-powered agent got to Mel, promised him the moon, and got it for him, too. Brozinski passionately despised that agent. He held Mel out for half a season and the Mustang attendance dropped forty percent. Finally Brozinski gave in and signed Mel for something like a million a year for ten years, guaranteed. Most athletes get that kind of dough, the fans get envious. Not with Mel. The fans thought he deserved it.

He sure did earn it. The half season after he signed the big contract he hit .342 and swatted twenty-two homers; in *half* a season. He ran down fly balls he had no business catching. He hustled like Pete Rose and Ty Cobb combined.

The following year (in the first full season after Mel signed the big one) a funny thing happened to the team: the Mustangs started winning. They had no right to be up there, yet they held second place all the way to the All-Star break. Mel's bolstered-up enthusiasm was catching the club on

fire and his bat was leading the way. That collection of chumps and bums was hustling, bunting, playing heads-up ball.

And then someone killed Mel Kolkie.

It was the last game before the All-Star break. We trailed first place by only half a game. The Mustangs were playing at home, the stands were filled, and Jake Washington was pitching for the 'Stangs. Boston, always a tough club and doubly so this year, was in town and on a hot streak, too.

It was a night game. That lefty (I forget his name: Borman or Norman or something like that) had our guys popping up and grounding out. Jake was doing the same to the Boston hitters. In the seventh Boston pushed around a run on a walk, a well-executed sacrifice bunt, a deep fly ball, and a looping single that dropped inches beyond our shortstop's outstretched glove. The score stood at 1-0, Boston, when the top of the inning was over.

Our team could do nothing against Boston's little lefty in the bottom of the seventh. Same story in the bottom of the eighth.

Before the ninth I went back into the deserted hallway to get a drink of water from the fountain. From the owner's private booth (which neighbored the press box) Sam Brozinski emerged, wearing a hat and just then pulling on gloves.

"Giving up already?" I teased him. "They've still got an at-bat, you know. Even the *fans* are staying to see it, Sam."

He grunted something rude and brushed past me. I let it pass. It was typical Sam Brozinski.

I went back into the press box.

In the bottom of the ninth our shortstop bunted and was thrown out. Thomas, our catcher, worked the count to 2-0 and then bounced a curve ball off the left center field wall. It was good for a double.

The crowd erupted into frenzied cheering. Their hero Mel Kolkie was at bat and he represented the winning run.

The Boston manager came out to the mound, waving his right arm toward his bull pen. Into the game came young Sipe, a fast-ball-throwing ox who was just about the best relief pitcher in either league. Back in New York once, the Yankees had clocked the big kid's fast ball at 99.7 miles per hour.

Mel Kolkie hit Sipe's first pitch into the center field stands. The entire

team greeted Mel as he crossed home plate. We won the game 2-1. The Mustangs were in first place. The crowd went berserk.

We sports writers all beat it down to the locker room. The Mustang players were pummelling one another happily. O'Shaughnessy, the Mustang manager, was grinning as if he'd won the Irish Sweepstakes.

First place at the All-Star break! Who would *ever* have thought the Mustangs . . . ? Even the sports writers were infected with the happy spirit.

A crowd surrounded Mel Kolkie. The center fielder was seated in front of his locker, was stripped down to his sweaty underwear, and was patiently answering our questions.

"What kind of pitch did you hit, Mel?"

"Were you *trying* for a home run or just for a base hit?"

"Did you know it was out as soon as you hit the ball?"

"How does it feel, Mel, to be on a first place club for the first time in your career?"

"Do you predict a pennant, Mel?"

—And more along those general lines. Mel Kolkie patiently and thoroughly answered them all. Then, "Pardon me, fellas," he said. He reached into his locker and brought out a leather covered kit.

We stayed. All the local sports writers were accustomed to his insulin injections and took less notice of them than we did of a wall or a chair. Mel performed his injection, all the while responding to our queries about the big win.

Moments later, before our horrified eyes, Mel Kolkie became terribly ill. He stood and clutched wildly at the air, he gasped for oxygen, his eyes rolled up until only the whites showed, and then, unconscious, he slumped to the locker room floor.

Confusion! Up roar! Mustang trainer Ralph Hopkins pushed through the crowd, crouched over Mel, and attempted to aid him.

TV cameras rolled into action. Strobe lights flashed. People shouted; people panicked. Larson of the *Times* threw up into a wastebasket. Ambulance attendants arrived. Mel Kolkie was strapped to a stretcher and rushed, under a siren, to the emergency room.

He was dead on arrival.

We writers understood that Mel had died of insulin shock. That's what

the doctors let us assume. That's how the wire services and TV networks reported it. That's how it went out to the public.

The next morning the league office issued a sanctimonious statement, some drivel about how the best men often die young. Then the Commissioner of Baseball announced that the coming All-Star game would be played with flags at half mast.

On the heels of these two press statements, Sam Brozinski released his own long statement that said: (a) Mel's uniform number would be retired, (b) minor league "sensation" Ron Meyer had been called up from the Mustangs' AAA club, (c) Mr. Brozinski had every confidence that his Mustangs would remain a contender with this rookie in Mel's old spot, and (d) the Mustang fans should therefore maintain their support (read this to mean ticket buying) for the club.

That afternoon the city coroner's office dropped a bombshell: Mel Kolkie had been murdered; traces of cyanide had been found in his corpse.

City police searched Mel Kolkie's locker. His hypodermic kit was missing. Old Hans, the locker room attendant for the Mustangs these past ten years, was detained. The police detectives released several smug statements to the press.

Then Hans accounted for his actions during the pertinent time periods, with witnesses. Hans passed a lie detector test. Hans was sent home.

The police next talked to Ralph Hopkins, the team's trainer. Ralph had often handled Mel's insulin and kept a supply in his training room refrigerator. To the Homicide Department's dismay Ralph also was able to account for his activities, with witnesses, during any suspicious periods. Ralph also passed a lie detector test. Ralph was let go.

Our chief of police issued a very scientific statement regarding polygraph tests. The machine could definitely be fooled, he stressed.

Three days after Mel's murder the All-Star game was played in St. Louis. Our league's players wore black armbands. The rival league won the game easily. National TV coverage featured a pre-game special (sponsored by a razor blade company) on the life and baseball career of Mel Kolkie.

Four days after the murder Mel Kolkie was buried amid much ceremony. Our mayor gave the eulogy and six ball players carried the casket. The scene was considered quite moving and many people cried. Two magazines sent photographic teams.

Mel Kolkie's father, a gas station mechanic in Arizona, signed a contract with a publishing house, "to tell the Mel Kolkie Story." The publishing house agreed to provide a ghost writer.

A prominent sports equipment manufacturer increased the production of its Mel Kolkie Signature Model gloves, bats, and balls.

A TV network (outbid by the publishing house for the senior Kolkie's authorization) pressed on with an "unauthorized" TV movie of Mel's career, "based on the true story." An actor familiar to game show and talk show audiences was signed to play the lead. A gorgeous TV starlet was slotted to play a romantic lead opposite Mel's character. No such woman had actually existed in Mel's life, but the network announced that "she will be an amalgamation of all the women Mel ever knew and her part will enhance the dramatic truth of the presentation. While perhaps not realistic in detail, her part will be realistic in spirit." Which of course, was hogwash.

Our chief of police (after a blistering dressing-down by our mayor) promised "great vigor" in the murder investigation. Nothing much was actually done; they had no clues.

Ten days after Mel's murder Sam Brozinski agreed to meet with me for an interview. The topic of our interview was ostensibly to be the team's future sans Mel, but I actually had other, more interesting questions in mind.

He began by giving me some nonsense about how his team was hurting financially.

"I checked with your ticket manager," I contradicted him. "Your sales are up ten percent since the murder. The team is somehow clinging to first place. This rookie Meyer is playing adequately in Mel Kolkie's spot and you're promoting the hell out of Mel's memory. The fans are coming in droves. So don't give me this crap about how you're hurting for dough."

Brozinski picked his nose, considered the tip of that finger, and said evenly, "Well, sir, you must remember my payroll. These days quality athletes cost—"

"Cut it out, Sam!" I interrupted him. "Today you have the lowest payroll in the league. Heck, you're only paying Thomas half of what a major league catcher is worth. This rookie Meyer is getting the legal minimum. And with Mel Kolkie dead you've eliminated *his* million bucks a year. You're cleaning up, Sam."

Brozinski's face glowed a furious scarlet. He pointed his index finger and hissed, "You can march right out of here, Billy! I'll not have you covering my Mustangs with that biased attitude. Why, I play golf with the publisher of the *Star-News* and I'll have him—"

"No you won't, Sam. You'll sit there and listen to me. See, Sam, I know who murdered Mel Kolkie."

Brozinski froze with his finger still pointed. He had forgotten that finger. His face was trying to bluff innocence.

"Good," he said weakly. "If you know that, why I'll be the first to thank you, Billy. The entire city will—"

I interrupted him for the third time. "I thought we agreed to cut out the games?"

We stared at each other. The clock on his wall ticked. His gaze broke first.

"That's better," I said. "Now let's consider the case. First off," I said, "even though Mel brought you back way over his salary through fan support, you never forgave his holding out for the big contract he deserved."

"So we had our differences."

"Well," I said calmly, "his murder saves you a cool million bucks a year in payroll. The contract was guaranteed for ten years and his death was one of the few ways for you to weasel out of paying it."

"What if I did benefit from his death? That does *not* turn me into a murderer!"

"Just wait, I'm coming to that. Now, Mel gave himself an insulin injection before his last game and felt no ill effects. He gave himself an insulin injection *after* the game and was soon dead. As a poison, cyanide acts almost instantly. So we must assume cyanide was placed in the insulin *during* the ball game."

"This does not pertain to me," insisted Sam.

"I think it does," I countered. "In the last inning the locker room staff was, to a man, out in the passageway watching the Mustangs bat. Until Mel hit his dramatic home run the locker room was deserted, which would have allowed the killer ample opportunity to doctor Mel's medicine."

Sam Brozinski pounded his fist hard upon his desk. "This still does not involve me!" he shouted. His face was purple.

"No? Well, early the next morning you had Ron Meyer promoted from

your AAA team. You certainly acted quickly. Being the All-Star break you had a few days to decide. Normally a team would have considered various replacements for Mel, would have talked trade with other teams, would have consulted with its own scouts and its manager. Only then would a team normally have made a decision. Yet you acted immediately. To a suspicious person this would almost appear to be a prepared move."

"Poppycock!"

I chuckled. He glowered. "Now," I said, "those are all items which, though embarrassing to you, are not by themselves incriminating. But when tied in with some facts known, as near as I can tell, to you and me alone, why the case gets positively lurid, Sam."

He said nothing. His eyes were narrow slits.

"For instance," I went on, "I did a little boning up on the details of your plastics process. *That* aspect has apparently not been investigated by the authorities.

"It seems your famous plastic heart valves are created, in part, through the use of a substance known as 'acrylonitrile.' They tell me acrylonitrile is a product of hydrogen cyanide."

Sam Brozinski shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Your laboratory uses hydrogen cyanide in bulk. I understand that, in a properly equipped laboratory, hydrogen cyanide can be turned into any number of different forms, many of those forms quite handy to a poisoner.

"In short, Sam, *you* have access to cyanide, access to a well equipped laboratory, and as a chemist you have the knowledge necessary to utilize both.

"Finally we come to the really interesting part. During the last inning of Mel's last game, the inning during which I assume the poison was added to his insulin, you were missing from your private box. Remember? I, and I alone, saw you heading down the back stairs. You were wearing gloves. Were the gloves to prevent fingerprints, Sam?"

Sam Brozinski could not meet my eyes.

"Did you put the cyanide directly in Mel's insulin? Or was his hypodermic needle dipped in it?"

"Which was it, Sam?"

An innocent man would have burst out angrily at me. An innocent man would have thrown me out of his office, or would have punched me in the face, or would have dared me to prove my wild accusations.

Sam Brozinski did none of those. He stood up, walked to the window,

stared almost dreamily through the venetian blinds at the infield where his team was taking practice, and said, "Why haven't you gone to the police? Is this blackmail? What is it you want, money?"

I walked to a spot directly behind him. "Sort of," I said to the back of his neck.

How to say it? I was sick of being a hack, of interviewing the spoiled athlete who had hit that evening's home run or scored that day's touch-down. I wanted more. I wanted freedom to write what I chose. I wanted a name that would be recognized. I wanted my own column.

"You," I said, "can give me an inside source. You can give me the straight dope when a famous player is being offered around the league in trade. You can give me breaks hours before any of the other reporters get them. You can leak sports information that will be invaluable to me.

"A leg up on everyone else," I said. "That's my blackmail, Sam."

"That's all?" he asked suspiciously.

"That's enough for me," I answered. "Let's begin with the Commissioner of Baseball. What exactly went on during that secret owners' meeting last week? Which owners want to fire him and which—"

My career has taken off these past months. Sam Brozinski has been quite invaluable. Oh, the Mustangs soon dropped back to their natural level (fourth place) but that didn't injure *my* career. I had the inside goods on player moves, on managerial firings, on all the inside machinations of the league. And after the baseball season ended the basketball season began. Sam Brozinski owns our city's basketball franchise (the Colts) and through them helps me just as much as he did through the Mustangs.

Five weeks after Mel's death my editor called me into his office and offered me a column. A month after that the column went into syndication. I'm in forty papers nationwide now and more are signing up each month.

How could an editor avoid printing my column? I've been writing scoop after scoop. The column has even been quoted twice on the network TV news: first on the expansion franchise for Salt Lake City; second on the Thomas-for-Jackson trade.

And then . . .

In my own kitchen . . .

One day I found my cat lying dead by the refrigerator, next to his food dish.

I brought a new kitten home. Four days later he was dead by the

refrigerator, next to his food dish.

I sniffed the cat food. It smelled faintly of wild cherries. They say cyanide smells of wild cherries.

"You never know," said Sam Brozinski when I confronted him. He smiled. It was the first time I'd ever seen him smile. "*Anything* a body eats could turn out to be, uh, *spoiled*."

I began to reply and he cut me off. "If you're thinking of going to the police with this, Billy, remember that you're an accessory now to Mel Kolkie's murder. You concealed information, you concealed evidence. I'm a rich man and I'd have the best lawyer money can buy. I could afford endless appeals. Who would represent you at *your* trial, Billy? How many appeals could you pay for?"

I saw his point.

"I have balanced our little equation," he said with a dark chuckle. "You'd best not push me too hard, Billy."

So there it stands.

And now, these days, I can't eat. I'm losing weight, down twenty pounds already. Every bite I force in assumes an ugly taste and I spit it out. I smell wild cherries everywhere, on every fork, on every morsel, in every glass.

Sure, I have my column now and my by-line is known. My name is printed in sports sections coast to coast.

But will it be in the obituaries tomorrow?

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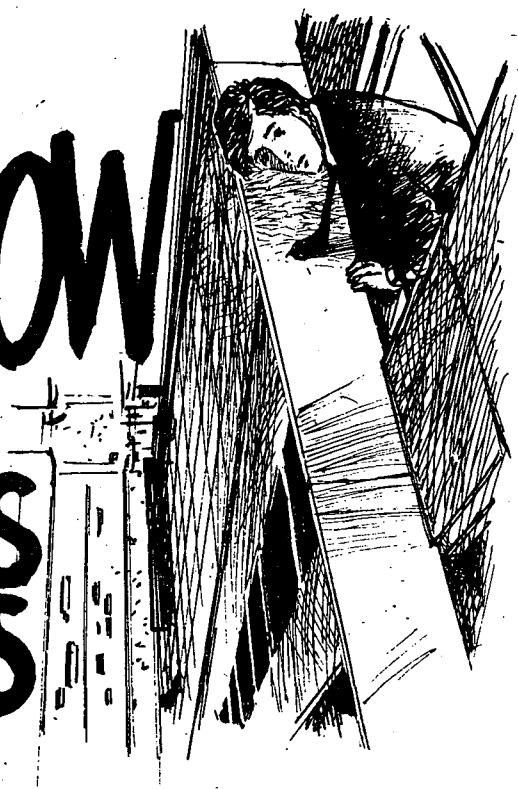
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Potential suicides are often prevented, but this time the method was unique. And chilling.

THE WINDOW

by
JAMES SALLIS



It was a bad day. A year full of them, in fact. Or three, if you got right down to it. And I did. *Way* down.

The corporation was going like wildfire, sure—we'd been getting so many government contracts, we kept expecting a grand jury to descend on us—but when I took the suit off at night there just wasn't anything there, nothing left inside. The whole thing was like a series of snapshots in which I saw my life fading off into the distance, skipping away from

me. And even then, the snapshots were out of focus, blurred, indistinct. Snap: Mary and the kids were gone, moved back to Boston. Snap: I started drinking too much, couldn't get anything together with another woman, either. Snap: Long "discussions" with my partners, *very* long. Couldn't sleep at night, lay there terrified, put away handfuls of librium, stayed away from mirrors. And then the money was gone. All of it. And I was in debt.

But this one was the worst yet. I'd stayed on late at the office—it had been dark outside for several hours now—trying to catch up on work I should have finished months ago. The figures kept blurring, and the contracts sounded like gibberish, and when I played-back my day's letters on the Dictaphone they sounded like lecture notes for some course I didn't have a chance in hell of passing.

Finally I got up and walked across the carpet to the window. Looked at all the little lights crawling along down there, going somewhere. Or away from something.

I don't think I ever made the decision consciously. It's just that I was suddenly standing there with the window open and I was leaning out, looking down. I felt my belt buckle sliding slowly across the sill and I was thinking, of all things, about my swimming coach back at Yale. Keep the legs together, boy, and your whole body rigid, taut; and don't be too quick off the board; you'll go in without a splash. It would put an end to the snapshots, at least.

"Don't do it," someone said.

I looked around and there was a guy sitting on the ledge about two feet away, smoking a cigarette. Twenty-eight stories up.

He flipped the cigarette out into the air and said, "You know your trouble, man? You want to be a goddamned statistic."

I watched the cigarette disappear into all the other little lights down there. "Well, since you brought it up, that is being *something*. And you have to admit, it's easier than all this."

"Yeah, I know. Wheels within wheels: it'll drive you mad, just watching them." He swung a leg onto the ledge. "Mind if I come in?"

I got out of the way, a process similar to pulling a Chianti cork out of a broken bottle, and he came on in. "Got a drink? Oh, that's right, you're off the stuff. Sorry." He paused. "Look, I'm supposed to give you this big philosophical hype now—you know, how knocking yourself off is a cop-out, how it doesn't take guts; that it's sticking it out, staying with *this*,

that takes the guts. But if you don't mind, we'll just skip that part of it." He glanced around the room. "Frankly, it bores the hell out of me. Do the same to you."

He walked across the room and sat down in the chair he'd selected with that first glance.

"I'm from Suicide Control," he said after a moment or two.

"You're from *what*?"

"Suicide Control. No, you don't know anything about it and you aren't supposed to. And we're government, not police. I've been specially trained by some of America's top psychologists and PR men to deal with potential suicides, some like you, some quite different. Been at it for about eight years now and I've done all right. Might even flatter you to know that one of the best men on the force—that's me—was assigned to your case."

"My case . . ."

"Yeah. We've been watching you for I guess four or five years. I *figured* I had the time pretty well pinpointed." He gestured towards the window. "And I guess I was right. Damned good timing."

He sat for a while watching me from across the room. I was still standing by the window.

"Look, man, the point's past and you won't do it now," he finally said. "So why don't you shut the window; it's getting cold in here. It was bad enough out on that damned ledge. You *sure* there's not something to drink around here?"

While I was getting the bottle and a couple of glasses out of the bottom drawer of the desk, he said kind of distractedly, "Anyhow, they're *all* gonna be doing it soon. Sleeping pills, guns, carving knives, aspirin. Hell, you wouldn't even have made a good statistic, with all that going on."

"Look, Mr. . . . ?" I said after we'd settled back with the drinks.

"We don't use names."

"I see. Well, anyhow, let me get this straight—if I can. You must admit that the entire disclosure is rather startling, particularly coming, as it did, in such a circumstance."

"Precisely why it's effective."

"Of course. But, Suicide Control: I take it by that you mean that you maintain surveillance of potential suicides and then, when they eventually make the attempt, restrain them from doing so?"

He finished off his drink and started chewing the ice.

"Well, that's not *quite* it, Mr. Davis. The word 'Control' is most carefully chosen."

He paused, looking casually around the office.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "we're trying to get them *to* do so. A meticulously programmed system of propaganda. Quite subtle, insidious, of course. And using every available media resource, it goes without saying. The program has been in full effect for ten years and the results have been quite satisfactory—well above our expectations, in fact."

He held up his glass and looked through it at the window, closing one eye. "Every one of us has his own ghetto, Mr. Davis. It's something inside you. Each of us is *enclosed* by something—his background, the color of his skin, a psychological kink, some hang-up or a rotten childhood—something that contains him. And he feels it. And, sooner or later, one way or another, he tries to break out of it. We're just playing on that."

"And showing him *how* to break out."

He paused a moment and nodded. Then he got up and walked to the bookshelves, idly looking over titles, souvenirs.

"There are, of course," he continued, "many people—professional men in medicine and law, scientists, technicians, top-level administrators—who must be saved. Protected from the indoctrination propaganda or from themselves, or in most cases, from both."

"And just how do you accomplish that?"

He shrugged. "Several methods. Guide them away from the propaganda, keep the propaganda away from *them*, insofar as is possible. Shock tactics, of course—which is why I was out on that damned ledge. And there's a program of counter-propaganda, naturally. And, for a few . . . well, what Kenneth Burke would call 'a symbolic action.' To give you some small idea of the scope of our operations, my own training took over three years." Then, almost as an afterthought: "Oh, yes. You are, of course, one of the men under our protection."

"A washed-out alcoholic failure. Fine choice."

"There *are* other ways of breaking out of personal ghettos. We're equally conversant with those, and can use them. We deal only with the abstract. In your case, potential and a considerable genius, proved in the past, for organization and executive function. Whatever interferes can be eliminated, one way or another."

I glared at his back for several seconds.

"Genocide," I finally said. "Regulated, scientific genocide."

He turned towards me. "If you wish. But efficient. *And necessary.*" He stared at my face, his own brows lowering. "Or would you perhaps, as a humanist, Mr. Davis, prefer the alternatives? Famine, panic, the dissolution and eventual collapse of any order within the boundaries of *our* country, and then all the others. Not to mention cannibalism, plague, an uninhabitable landscape, retreat to underground shelters which couldn't sustain us for more than a few years at best. It's coming much sooner than you think, Mr. Davis—or, it *was*. Our government has an impossible burden to carry, and a great responsibility to the world at large. It's the only way. It was necessary. Believe me."

My mind had stopped working. I poured another drink, drained it, felt a brief, weak stirring of mental activity, like a car turning over on a cold morning but you know it's never going to start.

"I've got just one question," I said. "Who decides? Who says which ones get a chance to go on living?"

"That's Classified. Top Security. And besides, I don't know myself."

"Great idea," I said. "Population explosion. Implode it before it reaches critical mass. Forgive the bad grammar: 'implode' isn't a word."

"Grammar or not, that's it, exactly. We thought you'd understand."

"Yeah. Great idea. Terrific." I was standing by the window again. "Come here."

He crossed the carpet and stood beside me.

"Look down there," I said. "What do you see? Those are people, every one of them, and their lives are just as important to them as ours to us—and *they're* just as important. As important to us, as important as *anybody*. Those are *people*. They have the same hopes and dreams, the same fears, the same problems, the same hopelessly absurd little lives we all have. And every day they get hurt, and *they* hurt, and they try to understand how it happened, and why, and they never can. Just like us. Maybe that's not much, but it's what they have, all *any* of us has, and you're going to take it away from them. And you're not even going to tell them you're doing it."

He stood for several moments looking down. Finally he spoke.

"I guess maybe that's the difference between us, Mr. Davis. I'm a lot younger than you; I grew up in a world you've only read about. You say you see people down there? I'm sorry: all *I* see are a lot of lights and some things moving around that look maybe like bugs." Then, just as

suddenly as it came, it was gone: the little chink I'd opened up closed, the man vanished inside again, and what I got next was a quote. "Besides, what's one man—a thousand, a million—when there's an entire country, quite possibly a world, at stake?"

I walked back over to the desk and poured two drinks. "And just where do you stand?" I asked, about the time the ice hit the second glass.

"I'm not on the list, if that's what you mean." He took the drink and had a long draw at it. "I'm a highly trained specialist, true. And immune, or at least inured, to the propaganda, of course. But when the time comes that I'm no longer essential . . . well, I'll go the way of the rest. One way or another."

"With great efficiency and . . . subtlety? On their part."

He nodded.

I was standing there by the window looking down at all those people, or all those lights and bugs, whichever, and he was beside me with the drink raised to his lips. "Don't think about it, Mr. Davis," he said over the rim of his glass. "It's too late, and it worked, and it's going to go on working." He finished off the drink and lifted his glass in a toast: "*C'est accompli.*"

I don't think I made the decision consciously that time either: I just pushed, and he happened to be in the way. Then I threw the glasses out after him. And after a while, the bottle, too.

Nothing ever came of it, naturally, and I've been all right ever since. I stay away from newspapers and radios; the thought of liquor never occurs to me. Business has picked up incredibly, and there's more work than I can do since my partners killed themselves (one slit his wrists in a cheap hotel down on the Strip, the other went out the window next door) and the firm fell into my hands. Government contract after government contract, they just keep coming in, and I may be taking on a new partner soon. It's been a good three years. Except sometimes late at night I remember that *other* night by the window and I start wondering if maybe the whole thing wasn't part of their plan all along—if, even while he was sitting out there on the ledge, he knew what was going to happen. I keep meaning to go down to the library and look up Kenneth Burke, too. But somehow I never get around to it.

The vandalism was unexpected, but the day had more alarming things in store for Miss Sinclair and the sheriff.

THE VANDAL

by
**STEPHEN
WASYLYK**



The man who stepped out of the late September sun into the Fox River sheriff's office seemed to be carrying a chip on his shoulder. He was young, his face thin, a heavy black beard and tightly curled hair reminding me of sheep's wool.

"Sheriff Gates? I'm—"

I nodded. "Derek Haskins, the artist building yourself a house on the bank of Arrowhead Creek. What can I do for you?"

"Probably nothing," he snapped. "You may know I've managed to get the framework up and am starting on the walls. I had to go to New York for a few days. When I got back this morning, I found someone had torn out some of my studding. It won't take too long to repair, but if the place is going to be vandalized every time I go away, I'm going to take steps."

I didn't ask what the steps might be. "Any idea of who might be responsible?"

"I have no idea why, much less who."

"Anything that might help identify the vandal?"

"A car or truck was used to pull the studding down. There are some tire tracks which may mean something to you. I didn't notice anything else."

I nodded. "Going back there now?"

"As soon as I pick up some nails at the hardware store."

"Don't touch anything. I'll be out to look around as soon as my deputy returns to take over the office."

He sounded surprised. "I'll appreciate that."

He took his pickup truck out of the lot in front of the office so fast he almost hit a small sports car turning in. Vandalism usually triggered a series of emotions: anger first, then frustration and helplessness, and finally fear when the victim found himself unable to cope. Right now Haskins was feeling the first.

The driver of the sports car, a tall blonde dressed in a turtleneck, slacks, and a loose windbreaker, headed for the door. I knew just about everyone in the county. I didn't know her.

She came through the door with a pleasant smile, the teeth white and even, the eyes blue and alive; one of those women who from a distance look too thin and awkward and gangly, but when she grows close, you realize you are looking at something special.

"Hi. You're Sheriff Gates?"

"That's what the sign outside says."

The eyebrows arched. "Well, don't blame me for asking. Sheriffs have been stereotyped as fat and round and middle-aged but you're young, not fat at all, and almost handsome."

I grinned. "Sit down. Whatever it is you've come for, you have it."

She slid into the chair and pulled her purse into her lap. "My name is Shana Sinclair." The eyes danced. "Really it is."

"Whatever you say. With a name like that, I assume you're an actress."

"You're not exactly a Sherlock Holmes on names are you? I'm a free-lance writer and I want to do a story on the problems of a county sheriff. Sort of contrast it with those of the city police. So I took a map, threw a dart at it, and here I am. I had in mind following you around for a few days. What do you think?"

"I suggest you look over our town, have a good dinner at the hotel, and go home. I can recommend the broiled brook trout highly."

"You mean you don't want me underfoot?"

"I mean that a few days in Fox River won't get you much of a story. All I can offer is a few traffic citations and, at the moment, a little vandalism."

"Maybe that's what I'm looking for."

I shrugged. "If you want to waste your time, it's fine with me."

My deputy Julio brought his four-wheel drive into the lot as fast as Haskins had left it, glanced at the sports car as he passed, and smiled at the woman when he entered the office.

"Miss Sinclair, Julio Rivera," I said.

Broad shouldered, darkhaired, and mustachioed, Julio bowed. Done by anyone else, it would have looked ridiculous. Done by Julio it was a grand gesture.

"Miss Sinclair wants to do a story on the day-to-day operations of the Fox River sheriff's office," I said.

"Take one day and multiply it by as many as you like," Julio told her. "They're all the same."

I reached for my hat. "I have to run out to that house Haskins is building," I told Julio. "Someone vandalized the place while he was in New York."

"What's this place coming to? Next we'll get mugging in the streets."

I ushered her into the four-wheel drive and checked the equipment in the rear, making sure I had my kit for making casts of tire tracks. I didn't point it out to her but it was standard equipment with us. On our lonely roads, witnesses to accidents were rare and very often the only evidence we had was a tire track in soft earth or mud. Like at Haskins' house.

As I pulled out of the driveway, she said, "You're not wearing a gun."

"Look over your shoulder," I told her. "There's a shotgun and a rifle behind the seat. Neither has been out of those clips in almost a year, except for cleaning."

She shook her head. "Somehow I can't believe that things are so tranquil around here."

"There is crime and there is crime. Luckily for me, a police officer here still carries authority, so a gun is seldom necessary. Someone you've known for years isn't likely to give you a hard time. The weapons are really for transients and other strangers. You might call it my concession to reality."

"Tell me where we're going."

"A man named Grainger has been selling building lots along the bank of Arrowhead Creek. So far he's sold five. The fifth was bought by an artist from New York named Derek Haskins. Someone vandalized the house he's been building while he was away, so we're going to look into it. Vandalism may not seem very important to you, but there are too many isolated buildings and unlocked doors around here to let it pass lightly."

I spun the wheel just before we came to the small bridge over Arrowhead Creek. The river road was macadam and a little bumpy, but the five people who had decided to live there didn't care about that.

To our left, a sparse stand of trees walled us off from the creek. To our right, a low stone wall separated the road from a field studded with rock outcroppings, the ground rising slowly, a half dozen dairy cattle munching away in the far distance near the top of the hill; a peaceful and bucolic scene broken only by the figure of a boy about fifteen who was walking through the field with a rifle cradled in his arm.

Indented into the trees, the first three houses had the sombre isolation of vacancy. They belonged to people who had built them only as summer retreats, and by late September they were empty except during weekends. The fourth was occupied by a man named Delphus Connery, who had retired and chosen to live here the year round. Why, I didn't know. Once the snow and cold weather came, the Connerys would find themselves isolated for days at a time, which might have been an adventure for a young couple but could be hazardous for people in their late sixties.

A gap in the trees signalled the entrance to Haskins' property. The others had blacktopped the driveway and a flat area for parking but he hadn't reached that point yet. The ground in his little clearing was soft and soggy and rutted by the tires of dozens of vehicles.

The home he was building looked like a box with a roof line that sloped steeply on one side. Facing us was the damage: a dozen or so wall studs

pulled loose and scattered on the ground, leaving a gap in the stark precision of the aligned timbers.

Haskins' pickup truck was parked behind the trailer that served as his living quarters until the house was finished.

There was no sign of him.

Shana Sinclair leaned forward, eyes alive, looking past the house to the creek and the small, wooded hill rising abruptly on the other side of the creek. "This will be beautiful," she said softly. "He's taking advantage of all of the natural elements. That hill will cut off the north wind and the house faces south. I've seen homes like this in New England. Solar homes. He'll install solar collectors on that steep roof to help keep the house warm in winter. I think it's exciting. I'd like to meet this Haskins."

I pushed open the door. "All we have to do is find him."

I called his name several times with no results, then walked over to the trailer and knocked. No answer, which was strange. He should have been there.

I tried the door, found it unlocked, and pulled it open.

He was lying on the floor toward the front of the trailer, his body occupying most of the narrow aisle between the cabinets of the kitchenette.

Behind me, Shana Sinclair gasped.

I stepped into the trailer and bent over him, reaching for a pulse and finding none and seeing the large red stain on his shirt. As I lifted my head, three small bright spots in the front wall caught my eye, tiny holes through which the sunlight bathing the hill across the creek gleamed.

Shana's voice was soft. "He's dead?"

"We have more than a case of vandalism. Someone shot him."

"The boy with the rifle—"

"Don't leap to conclusions. He's across the road. The bullets came from the opposite direction. Even a stray shot can't make a U-turn."

I felt a touch of anger, not at her but at whoever had fired those bullets. "It looks like you have a story," I said.

"I would have rather done without it," she said quietly.

It took Julio a half hour to get there along with the ambulance. While waiting, I examined Haskins' body more closely. The wound was ugly because the bullet had tumbled slightly after penetrating the wall. From the empty cup on the drainboard of the sink, I assumed he had been

about to pour himself a cup of coffee from the still bubbling percolator on the small stove. I turned off the flame.

The other two bullets had buried themselves in a cabinet door. I dug them out, the lead flat, whatever ballistics information they could have given me destroyed.

Outside, I found the tire tracks Haskins had mentioned and protected them with barriers. I wanted those tread casts more than ever now. Shana Sinclair dogged my heels, watching and saying little, for which I was grateful. One thing I didn't need right then was someone jabbering into my ear.

The ambulance crew left with the body and instructions to Dr. Blenheim, who acted as county coroner, to extract the slug that had killed Haskins as soon as possible, leaving Shana, Julio, and myself standing by the skeleton of the house.

A two-tone late model Cadillac swung into the cleared area and a middle-aged man stepped out, eyeing us curiously. He was wearing an expensive tweed sport coat and slacks but no tie, his shirt collar exposing a thick neck that went with the rest of the solid, heavy body.

His eyes found my badge. "Something wrong here?"

"An accident," I said.

"That ambulance I saw on the road—" He broke off. "It's Derek, isn't it?" His glance shifted to the studs scattered on the ground. "Damned fool. I told him a dozen times to give this up. You pay people to build these things. Should have listened to me and come back to the city where he belonged."

"Mind telling me who you are?"

"My name is Lundgren. I'm Derek's agent. Drove up to talk business. How badly is he hurt?"

There was no easy way to put it. "I'm afraid he's dead."

He stared at me. "Dead?"

"Someone shot him."

"Good Lord!" The words stung him into motion. He spun and walked a few feet away, one fist beating an open palm, stood for a moment and came back, his face blank, eyes tortured.

He drew a shaking hand across his lips. "Irony, isn't it? He left New York because his apartment had been burgled twice and he'd been mugged on the street. He wanted to live somewhere safe, he said. Now this. It's hard to believe a talent like that is gone. He should have ignored

his streak of bad luck, stayed in New York to develop his career properly, where I could watch over him and see that he met the right people." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I suppose it doesn't matter now. A great many people will be devastated when I tell them."

"If you knew him well, you'd know who should be notified. Wife if he had one; immediate family—" I shrugged. "Can you handle it?"

He nodded. "Certainly. He had a sister in Chicago."

"I suggest you call from the hotel in town. I'd like to meet you there later to get some background."

"Of course."

He backed the Cadillac out so fast he almost ran down a small man wearing a plaid jacket walking down the little lane that led to the road. The man's gray hair was clipped short, his face bony.

"Who is this?" whispered Shana.

"Connery, the retired fellow who owns the property next to this."

Connery looked over the stark framework. "What's going on, Gates?"

"Someone vandalized the house your neighbor was building."

He was old but he was quick. "Was building? That mean he's not going to finish it?"

"Can't. He's dead. Someone shot him."

"How did that happen?"

"Three bullets through the wall of the trailer."

He pulled a pipe from his pocket and tamped the tobacco into it carefully, as though he needed something to hold on to. "That's a shock. I can understand the vandalism. The man was trouble from the minute he moved in. Some people are like that, you know. Just don't know how to get along. Every weekend this summer, cars parked all over the road, stereo blasting as loud as it would go, half-naked women swimming in the creek. Regular circus. I wasn't the only one who complained. The others did, too. After all, they aren't that far away. Told them what he told me. Go to hell."

"It looks as though someone resented that. It wouldn't have been you, would it?"

"Me? No. I'm too old for that sort of thing."

"Hear any shooting?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. Maybe three shots, but it could have been Tom Rossi, the farmer's kid. He's always after rabbit or woodchuck in that field across the road. Sometimes I take my rifle and join him in

a little shooting contest. Had one earlier today. The kid is very good and has enough sense not to fire in this direction but maybe this time—”

“The bullets came from the other direction.”

“Didn’t think the kid was that dumb. Well, one thing sure.” He puffed the pipe reflectively. “No more wild parties. I’ll tell the wife.”

He strolled back to the road trailing aromatic tobacco smoke.

“Is he for real?” asked Shana. “It didn’t bother him too much that a man was killed.”

I didn’t agree. Connery was a man of few words and many grunts when holding a conversation. This was the most I’d ever heard him talk. Sometimes people use hard words to mask soft feelings.

“Make a cast of that tire track I marked off,” I told Julio. “It appears to have been made by the truck or car that was used to pull down the studs. I don’t know if the vandalism and the killing are connected so we’ll work on both and see what develops.”

I started across the clearing and stopped, looking down at the tangled web of ruts laced through the soft earth. The fresher ones still oozed moisture; those of Haskins’ pickup, the ambulance, and Lundgren’s Cadillac. I motioned to Julio. “As long as you’re doing it, make casts of this track and the one over there that seems to match.”

He glanced at the tracks and the house. “Doesn’t look like these would be in any position to pull out those studs.”

“Maybe I’m just using up the kits so we can order new ones.”

He grinned at Shana. “If you believe that, you’re crazy.”

She followed me into the trailer. “Why do you want those casts? Do you think the killer drove in?”

“The killer wasn’t in the clearing when he fired.” I pointed to the sun gleaming through the holes in the front wall. “The bullets entered there, which is a good five feet above the floor, while the floor is about eighteen inches off the ground. That’s a total of about six and a half feet. If you look closely, you’ll notice that the holes slant slightly downward between the inner and outer walls, which they would have to do for one of the bullets to hit Haskins in the chest. Even a tall man would have to hold the weapon above his head or climb a stepladder to do that, so it’s obvious they were fired downward from that hill across the creek.”

I sighted through the holes, fixing in my mind the section of the hill that I could see. “I’m going over there to see what I can find. Would you rather stay here or come along?”

"I wouldn't miss this for the world."

Julio nodded when I told him where we were going and I took the four-wheel drive out to the highway. The kid with the rifle was gone from the field. Immediately after I crossed the bridge, I turned into a road that was nothing more than two ruts through the grass. The soil on this side was higher and dry and packed hard. I'd find no impressions here.

We climbed to the crest of the hill through the trees and worked our way down the other side to where I thought the shots had been fired. It wasn't easy. The trees grew thick and close and where you weren't fighting low branches, you were avoiding the tough underbrush. I grinned when Shana muttered a few unladylike words as a sharp twig raked an ankle.

Watching where I placed my feet, I combed the area. About where I thought they would be, I found three brass shell cases—.22 caliber, long rifle, rimfire Remingtons. Not much of a weapon but deadly enough to have killed Haskins. Leaving a dead branch with my handkerchief tied to it to mark the spot, I used a pencil to slide them into a makeshift envelope I manufactured from a page torn from Shana's notebook and we worked our way back to the road, climbed into the four-wheel drive, and headed toward the clearing.

Again, Shana hadn't bothered asking questions, but she'd been busily making notes so I knew the questions would come later. At least those that she hadn't been able to answer for herself. That was fine with me. I really didn't have too many answers at the moment.

Julio's casts were ready. I placed them carefully in the rear of my vehicle.

"See you at the office later." I motioned Shana back aboard.

"Where to now?"

"Since the Rossi kid appears to be the only one in the vicinity with a rifle, I want to talk to him."

The entrance to the farm was down the river road about a mile away, a curving lane that led to a white farmhouse around which a barn and some small outbuildings were clustered.

We found Rossi, a heavy man with broad shoulders, coming out of the barn.

He nodded. "Hello, Gates. What brings you out here?" He looked at Shana and smiled. "This your new deputy?"

"Miss Sinclair is a writer in search of a story."

"Not much to write about in Fox River."

"So I told her. Like to talk to Tom. Haskins, the man building the house down at the creek, was shot and killed. Saw Tom cruising the field with his rifle and wanted to know if he could tell us anything about it."

His deep tan suddenly seemed to have no substance beneath it. "What are you getting at?"

"Don't get upset. The shots came from the other side of the creek and Tom was on this side. All I want to know is if he noticed anything while he was out there."

He passed a trembling hand over his face. "Dammit, Gates. Did you have to scare the hell out of me? I know the boy is careful but accidents have been known to happen. How did this Haskins get himself shot?"

"I haven't put it together."

His eyes shifted to Shana. "Looks like you found a story after all," he said soberly.

"Not yet," she said. "All I have is a cast of characters."

The boy was waiting as we came up to the house. I don't know how these things work genetically, but he'd taken after his mother, who was a tall, slender woman with a touch of auburn in her hair.

I told him about Haskins. "What I'd like to know is whether you heard or saw anything while you were out there."

"Did a little shooting with Mr. Connery. He beat me. He always does. Wish I had a gun like his. Didn't see anyone else. A few cars, that's all. Saw you go by." He spoke to me but his eyes were fixed on Shana as if he wanted to store her in his memory. The boy obviously had good taste.

"Hear any shooting?"

"Might have, but too far away to be sure."

"Do me a favor. Get your rifle and a shell."

"I thought you said he couldn't have had anything to do with it," said Rossi.

"Take it easy," I told him. "You know I have to touch all bases."

The kid brought an old, single shot bolt action. I loaded it, fired into the air, ejected the casing, and compared it to one of those I had found on the hill. The firing pin and the ejector had marked it in different positions.

"Now we know," I said to Rossi.

As we drove off, I could feel Shana studying me. "I think you have already come to some sort of conclusion."

"I wouldn't want to ruin the suspense of your story."

"As long as it all comes out at the end."

"I can't guarantee that. You may have to make up your own ending, but then you can arrange all your facts neatly. Life seldom works out that way."

We went by Haskins' place and turned in at Connery's. Two vehicles were parked on the apron in front of the house; a small import and a big battered station wagon. The wagon was equipped with a trailer hitch, the ball covered with a thin film of rust except for the inner part where the rust had been burnished off. I knelt beside the rear tire, poked an index finger at a thin layer of dark mud, then pulled one of the casts Julio had made and compared it with the tread. They matched.

Shana cleared her throat.

"Don't say it," I said. "Let's find Connery."

I knocked on the door. Connery answered, the woman at his elbow short and stout and not believing in color rinses, her snow white hair carefully arranged.

"I knew you'd show up," he said. "I've been watching you from the window. Yeah, I pulled the studs down. Thought maybe if he felt he wasn't wanted, he'd give up."

"All you did was make him mad."

He shrugged. "It was worth a try. What's the penalty?"

"That comes later. Right now I want to see your rifle."

His eyes shifted suddenly to a point beyond me. "You're not going to try to hang that on me, too, are you?"

His wife's hands were clasped so tightly together the knuckles were white.

"Just get the rifle and a shell."

He brought them out of the house reluctantly. The rifle was an old bolt action similar to Tom Rossi's. I fired the shell, rescued the casing, and compared it to one of those I'd found on the hill. This one didn't match either.

I turned it over in my fingers for a long time, feeling like a man with a sure bet at the race track seeing his horse stumble at the finish line.

I suppose he couldn't help his "I told you so" expression when I handed the rifle back to him.

We were halfway back to town when I eased the four-wheel drive to

the side of the highway and sat, my fingers drumming on the wheel.

"What's wrong?" asked Shana.

"Something I can't pin down."

"The tire tracks?"

"Partly. I have an explanation for those, but at the moment I don't see how it fits. What's bothering me is that there were two .22 rifles in the vicinity. The odds say that one of them has to be the one that killed Haskins, but neither checks out, so there *must* be a third. The big question is, where is it? If we knew that, we would know who fired it and the problem would be solved."

"Someone who hasn't entered the picture as yet?"

I shook my head. "I think not. I feel that your cast of characters is complete."

"Surely you don't think the Rossi boy had anything to do with it."

"The Rossi boy," I said thoughtfully. "He said something—" I slapped the wheel and grinned. "You've just earned yourself the best dinner the hotel can serve." She started to ask a question as I made a fast U-turn and sped back to Connery's house.

He answered the door, his wife peering over his shoulder again. "You change your mind about arresting me for the vandalism?"

"That comes later," I said grimly. "When I talked to the Rossi kid, he said he wished he had a rifle like yours, but the one you showed me was no different from the one he owned. He had to be talking about something a lot newer and a lot fancier than that old bolt action. Get it."

Behind him, his wife began to weep. "I told you," she whispered. "I told you he wouldn't be fooled."

"I can call Julio to bring a search warrant," I said.

His shoulders sagged. He shook his head. "No sense fighting it. I mean, after all, I didn't kill Haskins. I just didn't want to get involved so I lied. I didn't use the rifle on that trailer."

"Who did?"

"Lundgren."

My horse had managed to pick himself up and cross the finish line first after all.

On the way to town, they sat in the rear seat, the woman still weeping. The rifle, a sleek autoloader with a seven shot clip, lay between the front seats.

I glanced over my shoulder. "You want to tell me why you let Lundgren use that rifle?"

"For a hundred dollars, that's why," said Mrs. Connery bitterly. "I told him not to take the money. You can't trust anyone from New York driving a big car and wearing fancy clothes. That's what I said. Those people will get you into trouble."

Connery's eyes found mine in the rear view mirror. "Didn't sound like a big deal at the time. I was cleaning my rifle after I came back from shooting with the Rossi kid when he stopped by to ask if I knew where Haskins was. Told him I didn't know. He'd seen the damage, he said, but he wished that whoever it was had taken the time to knock the whole thing down.

"He was laughing. He said that Haskins had come to Fox River for peace and quiet and someone was knocking his house down before he even got it built. It should teach him you can't run away from something, he said."

"He thought it was a big joke," said Mrs. Connery.

"What he said he'd like to do," said Connery, "was show Haskins that Fox River was really no safer than New York. If he could do that, he'd have no trouble persuading him to go back. He pointed at the rifle. That would do it, he said. Put a few shots into the trailer to make Haskins think he could get killed here as well as anywhere and he might get disgusted enough to leave. That might be true, I told him, but no one around here would do such a thing. Hell, he said, he'd do it himself if it would get the kid back to where he belonged. Offered me a hundred dollars to borrow the rifle and a full clip for an hour or so. I gave them to him. He was laughing when he came back. Said he was going to town to look for Haskins."

"That was because when he went up on that hill, he wasn't aware that Haskins had returned because he couldn't see his pickup truck," I said grimly. "When he fired into that trailer, he had no idea Haskins was inside. He killed him and didn't even know it."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"I'll tell you what you had to do with it. You gave him the rifle, which was criminal irresponsibility. When I told you that Haskins had been shot, you knew how it had happened but you kept your mouth shut because you knew you shouldn't have given him that rifle. When I asked you for the rifle you had been using, you gave me the wrong one. You're

as guilty as Lundgren and you know it, so don't sit there claiming innocence."

At the office, I turned him over to Julio and went looking for Lundgren, Shana still with me. Even before I entered the hotel, I knew it was a waste of time because that Cadillac wasn't in the parking lot and there was really no other place in town where he might be.

When we came back out on to the veranda after checking inside, I was angry with myself. I'd had him and let him get away, which I shouldn't have done until the thing had been settled.

Shana saw the look on my face. "It's not your fault, you know."

"It's no one else's. Those tracks told me his Cadillac had been at the clearing twice today, the first time while Haskins was gone because Haskins' pickup truck had run over the original set, which meant he'd been away *during* the shooting. When I told him Haskins was dead, he never asked how it had happened which I was dumb enough to put down as shock, but it was because he already knew." I took her arm and steered her toward the four-wheel drive. "All I can do now is get a warrant and have him picked up in New York."

The sombre atmosphere in the sheriff's office when we stepped through the door made me raise my eyebrows at Julio in a silent question.

"You didn't find him," he said quietly.

"No. Probably halfway to New York by now."

He shook his head. "The state police just called. He was doing eighty when he lost control on a curve twenty miles south of here. He's dead."

The Connerys sat, faces blank and holding hands, seeming much older than they had been earlier.

"Take them home," I told Julio. "I'll take the whole thing up with the county attorney tomorrow."

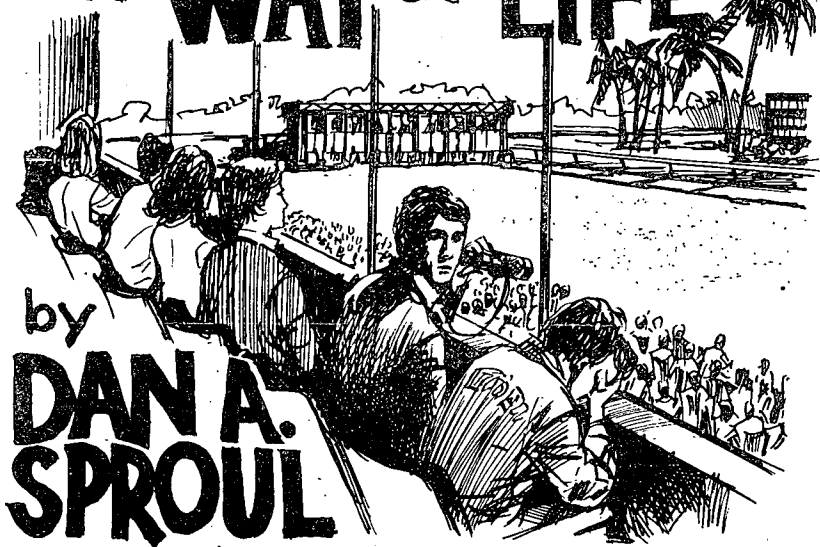
After they had gone, I leaned back and put my feet up on my desk, thinking that when Connery had pulled those studs down, he had probably felt he was committing a harmless crime, but he had initiated a series of events that had led to the deaths of two men. Which went to prove that breaking any law, no matter how small, could never really be considered harmless. But that little thought I would leave to the philosophers.

What bothered me was that twice along the way I had made mistakes. If I had returned with Haskins to the clearing, he would still be alive, and if I had held Lundgren instead of letting him go so readily, he wouldn't

(continued on page 156)

It was eight minutes to post time. The stranger wanted Torry to place a bet. . . .

WHERE LARCENY IS A WAY OF LIFE



by
**DAN A.
SPROUL**

I had a good start considering it was only the third week into January. My bankroll had swelled to nearly five grand. More important, the Hialeah meet would run another six weeks before Gulfstream cranked up. Without any serious mistakes, I could figure on clearing about fifteen thousand before the northern tracks opened for the spring meets.

The first four races on the card looked either unpredictable or unprofitable. Consequently, I didn't bother to arrive until the fifth. The fifth

race was a mile and a sixteenth on the grass for newly turned three year olds. I let it pass also.

In the sixth race I made a hundred dollar win bet. I had just left the sellers' windows in the clubhouse when the guy stopped me. I'd never seen him before, but he knew me all right. Called me by name; it was curious. As far as I knew, there were only two other pros at the track who knew me on sight.

A professional horseplayer doesn't seek publicity. It's bad for business. Obscurity is a stock in trade. It protects your prices, and clouds the leech-like eye of the tax man. A consensus of the public would show that most people think it criminally immoral to receive one's sole income from betting the horses. Of course, such beliefs do not deter the same public from badgering you for tips if they happen to know who you are.

This fellow wore mechanic's coveralls. He seemed haunted, like he'd misplaced his last five-eighths socket. A timid sort from the way he spoke. He was as out of place in the clubhouse as a bent tie rod in a jewelry store display. I couldn't imagine how he knew me, so I asked him.

"Mr. Holman pointed you out. I'm sorry to bother you."

He was all politeness, not the pushy type. I didn't know who Mr. Holman was. I said as much.

"Kenny Holman—he works in the Valet Parking Lot."

Then I knew who he was talking about. Kenny was the old man who took care of my car. I gave him a short priced horse every now and then instead of the dollar he invariably jabbed his hand out to receive.

"Nice to meet you," I told him. An obvious lie, but apparently he believed it. When I started walking down toward my seat, he followed, trailing a few steps behind.

As we approached my aisle, I turned to him.

"Look, Simon, I don't want to be rude, but if you don't have a seat reserved in this area, I suggest you hike it on outta here."

His voice broke as he spoke. I thought I detected tears in his eyes.

"I have to talk to you, Mr. Torry."

I checked the board. There was still about eight minutes until post time. I admit I'd become a bit curious. "What is it you want?" I asked him, moving into my seat. I picked up my binoculars. The horses were just coming out onto the track from the paddock.

Coveralls sat down in the seat next to me, put his head in his hands, and began to sob.

This was getting embarrassing. I asked him most cordially to shut up. He wiped his nose on his greasy sleeve.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Torrey. It's just that . . ." He broke off, knuckling some water out of his right eye.

Whatever was bothering him, he seemed to be barely coping with it. I hadn't seen anybody that broken up since 1965 when Ben McCoy picked a seventy to one sleeper at River Downs that beat the favorite by a nose, only to get disqualified.

"My name's Toby—Toby Walsh," the fellow tells me. "Mr. Holman said you were a . . . that you made your living betting on horses." He paused to let me confirm or deny the fact. When I did neither, he took a wad of crumpled bills out of his pocket. "There's three hundred dollars here," he continued. "It's all I've got left."

I saw it coming now. He'd probably dropped a bundle at the track, got himself in trouble, now he figured to bail out on something I could give him.

"You better take it and go on home," I advised him. I have no sympathy for losers. Everybody takes the same risk.

"You don't understand. I want you to bet it for me."

I figured if I ignored him, he'd see the futility of it all and leave. I used the binoculars to check out the number six horse, a sturdy bay gelding. He was ten to one on the board.

"You've got to help me, Mr. Torrey. I've got nobody else to turn to. There's no other way to raise the money. I . . . I don't know the first thing about betting on a horse."

I didn't bother to lower the binoculars from my eyes before letting him have it.

"Your first mistake was betting money you couldn't afford to lose. Your second mistake was asking me to . . ."

"No—you don't understand," he wailed. "I haven't bet any money yet—I . . . I wouldn't know how to begin. That's why I came to you."

I lowered the binoculars. The field of thoroughbreds had made their way onto the backstretch. They were slowly walking to the starting gate.

"Look, Welsh . . ." I began.

"Walsh."

"Okay, whatever. What exactly do you want from me?"

"It's Elsa, my daughter, she has to be put on a dialysis machine every few days. It's her kidneys. I don't have the money to pay any longer. My

savings are gone." He choked off a whimper. "I'm going to donate one of my own kidneys as soon as she's strong enough to undergo the operation. But I've got to have the money to keep her on the machine another two weeks at least. I can't borrow any more—I've tried everywhere. I don't know what else to do."

He grabbed me by the sleeve. There was a smear of grease on his ear. "Please, you've got to help me, Mr. Torry. She's only four years old."

"Look . . . er . . . Walsh, even if I decided to bet the money for you, I couldn't guarantee anything. I'm not infallible, you know. What if I lost it all?"

"Mr. Holman said you were the best . . . I'll take my chances. There's nothing else left to do."

I gave it some thought. The guy looked desperate. A real bundle of agitation.

"Just how much do you need?"

"A thousand, just a thousand would be enough. The operation is being taken care of. I just need enough for the dialysis machine."

I thought about just giving him the horse and sending him off. He was, after all, risking his own money. However, a longstanding practice of not divulging my picks prevented this. I didn't want to start a precedent. Besides, tips, once given, seem to spread at the track like an anthrax epidemic.

I stuck out my hand. It was three minutes to post. "Okay, give me the money," I said. He handed it over.

"You stay here—I'll be right back."

He was a damn trusting soul, handing over his bankroll to somebody he didn't know. Could be he was on the up and up.

Walsh nodded his head happily as I squeezed by him and headed up to the sellers' windows. I'd only gone up about four steps when I spotted Dobbs. He was hard to miss. Like a pregnant buffalo is hard to miss.

Dobbs was a gypsy on the circuit, like myself. We weren't really friends. I put him onto a goat a few years back at Aqueduct. Chances were good he hadn't forgotten the way I stiffed him; he'd dropped a bundle. But he surprised me with a smile as I passed. I nodded at him in return.

I bet all of Walsh's three hundred, stuck the parimutuel tickets in my shirt pocket. When I passed Dobbs on the way back down, he spread his hefty jowls into another smile. This time he waved. Very curious.

Walsh had recovered considerably. At least his eyes were dry. He wore

an excited, expectant look. He stood up so I could slide by him to my seat.

He leaned forward eagerly. "Did you bet it?"

I nodded, picked up my binoculars.

"Which . . . which horse did you bet?"

"How old did you say your daughter is?" I asked.

"Ah . . . she's four."

"Four . . . hmmm. That is a coincidence. I bet the four."

I watched him shoot a glance at the tote board. The four horse was two to one.

"That should give you about nine hundred back," I pointed out.

I sneaked a look back over my shoulder. Dobbs was staring down at me; he quickly shifted his gaze to the track when he saw me look around. I turned back to the infield just in time to see the break from the gate.

It took the field claimers a minute and twelve seconds to cover the six furlongs. Number six, the bay gelding I had watched throughout the post parade, won in a handy ride by five open lengths. The four horse finished up the track, off the board.

Walsh began wailing. "Oh my God! What am I going to do!" He rocked back and forth moaning. Sobs racked his thin frame.

"Look, I'm sorry, Walsh . . . ah, Toby." I put my hand on his back. "I'm afraid that happens sometimes."

His bony face was red, tearstained.

"But Elsa . . . what about Elsa? What's going to happen to her?"

I hadn't liked Walsh on sight, I liked him even less for putting me in the position of being personally responsible now for the life or death of his daughter. Seeing Dobbs so friendly had made me suspicious. I had figured Dobbs to be working some kind of ripoff. Now I wasn't so sure. Walsh looked completely broken. He sat limp, dejected, moaning about Elsa. I decided Dobbs just didn't have the smarts to pull something like this.

I pulled out my money clip and peeled off ten one hundred dollar bills.

"Here." I shoved the bills into Walsh's hand.

He took the money, tears continuing to well in his eyes.

"God will bless you for this," he said. "Elsa and me won't ever forget you. You saved her life." I thought for a minute he was going to kiss me.

"Glad to do it," I mumbled.

He stood up. "I've got to go. Her treatment has already been delayed

this week." He started down the aisle, turned and shouted back. "I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"It's okay," I said. But he didn't hear me. He trotted down behind the box seats and disappeared into the crowd.

I was reaching over to pick up the *Racing Form* from his vacant seat when I spotted Dobbs standing at the end of the aisle.

"Hey, Torry! Long time, no see." He slammed his bulk down beside me before I could say anything.

He leaned toward me, speaking out of the corner of his mouth in his conspiratorial style. "You know who that guy was, don't you?"

"Said his name was Walsh, why?"

"He give you that crapola about Susy's open heart surgery?"

"Elsa's kidneys," I corrected.

Dobbs chuckled. "He told me and Barker heart surgery. Him and that parking lot guy are working a scam. How much did he tap you for?"

"A thousand," I admitted, studying the *Form* more intently.

Dobbs let go with a huge guffaw. While he was so occupied, I hastily circled a horse in the seventh race on my program. He was still getting a big cheese out of my plight when he got up to leave.

"Just thought I'd let you know." He kept the smile on his beefy face. "He got Barker for five hundred."

I flipped my program over innocently, making sure Dobbs saw the circled selection, then quickly tucked it into the folded copy of the *Form*.

"How much did he get from you?" I asked.

Dobbs laughed again. His big belly shook. He was having a lot of fun at my expense.

"You kidding. I told him to hit the bricks when he came around after Barker had tipped me."

I nodded. "Nice of you to warn me."

He gave me his best leer. "See you around, Torry." Abruptly he turned and headed back up toward his seat with effort. I watched him waddle up to the next level and make a beeline to the sellers' windows. I tossed the program away. I had no more bets for the day. Certainly not the dog circled for the seventh race on my program.

I pulled Walsh's three one hundred dollar tickets from my shirt pocket. Putting Walsh's three hundred on that six horse to win on top of my hundred had knocked hell out of the price. I saw by the board that he'd only gone off at eight to one.

I did some quick mental arithmetic. Walsh's three hundred would net me back twenty-seven hundred—less the thousand I gave him. That left seventeen hundred, plus the nine hundred from my own bet.

Good thing that nitwit Dobbs told me about Walsh. I had begun to feel a bit guilty about not giving poor old Toby a few hundred extra for the kid. I stayed in my seat long enough to watch the even-monied favorite I had circled on my program run next to last in the seventh. Dobbs would be in mortal agony. I made a mental note to stiff Kenny the next time he parked my car.

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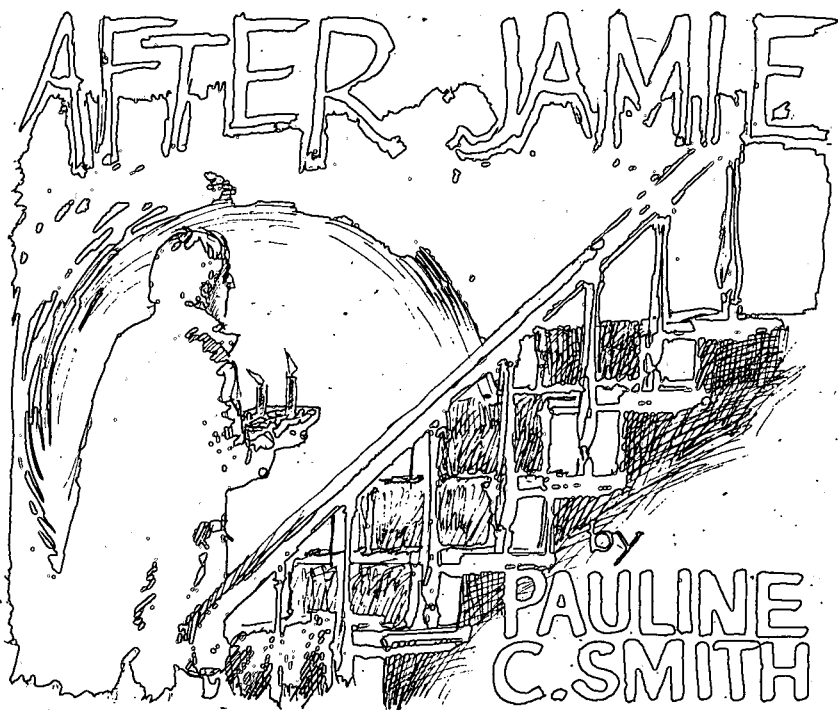
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D2H71

The candlelight showed only empty rooms. But the voices were persistent.



The house looked different, not only older and shabby, but smaller than he remembered.

He had always thought of it as big and spacious, the front porch extending the width of the house in open-armed welcome. Instead, the porch started at the corner and stopped short just beyond the central front door—in half-welcome, he thought—or perhaps no welcome at all.

He had remembered the tall poplars as green, their leaves whispering

secrets in the gentle breeze, and the bridal wreath showering white on the lawn. It was always spring, the way he remembered it, but now it was winter and he shivered inside his overcoat.

The man at the courthouse had duly warned him: "The gas and electricity have been turned off." He took the key from his pocket and climbed the two steps to a porch not only shorter but narrower than he remembered, unlocked the door, and walked inside, where he felt the cold more than he had felt it in the yard and looked into darkness deeper than the outside winter dusk.

He walked down the narrow hallway, hearing voices. . . . *It's like an icebox in here. Joel, see to the furnace. Gene, start the fireplace log. Jamie might catch cold.* . . .

The parlor, on one side, was a cavern of shadows. There was the couch where Jamie used to lie, being read to, petted and wrapped up before the sputtering blue flame of the gas log. He remembered the inside of the house in winter and the outside of the house in the spring. That surprised him when he recalled that it had been a hot summer day when he left home, yet he remembered summer not at all. . . . *Joel, Gene, who put Jamie in the sun to broil?* . . . He remembered the words but not the summer sunshine.

He felt his way into the parlor over the worn flowers of the rug. *Mama, Jamie puked on the Axminster. . . . Don't say puked. He threw up and couldn't help it. Oh, my goodness, where's the pail and soap?*

He turned the jet that controlled the gas log. The man at the courthouse had been right. There was no hiss, no sound at all. The gas was as dead as his mother.

He wished he had seen her during her last months, and he could have, knowing she was alone, old and ailing. It was right there in the hometown paper his city news vendor provided in weekly batches. So he could have returned, but he had not, for then he would have had to remember it all and relate his memories. His mother would have forced him to. Or, perhaps, he would have forced her.

He raised his coat collar, blew on his hands, and fumbled his way across the hall.

It was lighter here on the west side of the house, light enough so that he could make out the big table and the chairs around it. Unconsciously, he reached for the switch. It clicked but the room remained in winter gloom. The man at the courthouse had warned him.

The dining room was their family room long before architects coined the title. Joel and Gene did their homework at the dining table, squabbling in a friendly manner under the cheerful glow of the Tiffany lamp. *Boys, fool around much longer and you won't have time to listen to the Lone Ranger.* . . . That was his father's voice, gentle but with an edge of authority.

He turned away only to stop in the doorway, for a new sound had entered his memory—an animal sound forming distorted words. He whirled, seeing the room, the family room, even in darkness, the way it became after Jamie.

Jamie, a late child, born when Joel and Gene were half grown, was tardy as well in his development; being slow to walk and uncoordinated, slow to talk and unintelligible. *Now you let Jamie sit up at the table and play with you.* . . . His mother's voice, flat with martyrdom, harsh with guilt. She had been ashamed through her middle-aged pregnancy, blaming herself for what the shame finally produced. . . . *Well then, put the Monopoly set away and build blocks with him. Color pictures. Do something that Jamie can do, too.*

He left the family room and went into the kitchen, stumbling against a stool in the dark. He grabbed as it started to tip and set it on its legs, hearing again Jamie's words articulated around a tongue that rolled out meanings only his mother could understand. *Jamie wants to sit on the stool.* . . . So the stool became Jamie's, tied to it, large head wobbling on narrow shoulders while his mother stood to pare potatoes, scrub the carrots, and wash the dishes.

"Oh, God!" he breathed, the darkness closing him in.

The kitchen windows had become dingy squares of lighter shadow that let in the deepening night. He heard the sound of a truck in the distance, very like past thunder during long-ago storms that blacked out the lights and caused his mother to cry out in panic: *Get the candles, George* . . . with Jamie's screams accompanying the sudden darkness. . . . *In the top drawer by the windows. The tray is on the counter, the matches on the stove. Hurry!*

He felt his way toward the windows; pulled open the drawer, and felt for the candles with groping fingers. His hand, searching the counter, found the tray with its tallow mounds of past light. Arms outstretched, he reached the stove; and there on the ledge he touched and clasped the box of kitchen matches. Remembering his father's methodical procedure;

he scratched a match alive to catch the wick below its charred tip. With the spluttering flame, he heated the tallow candle bases and glued them to old opalescent heaps on the tray so that he created, once all the standing candles were lit, an explosion of light. . . . *See, Jamie, there is the light. Isn't it pretty?* . . . The screams ceased and revealed the kitchen as it had always been, oilcloth-topped counters, the cookie jar shaped like a pig. . . . *Gene, Joel, you can make the cookies and we will fill up the pig.*

He held the flaming tray close to the cookie jar and lifted the lid that was the top of the pig's head—and looked into clay-colored shine. No past cookie crumbs because, after Jamie, no cookies were mixed, rolled, and baked. *Jamie might choke. We must be careful of Jamie.*

He remembered an overheard conversation between his mother and father, forgotten with the years, back now like a half-remembered paragraph from a book read long ago. The children had been in bed and presumably asleep. Joel and Gene in their room, Joel in the upper bunk, a year older and entitled to his choice, Gene down below. Jamie, of course, in the big bedroom, the room of their parents, curled in a fetal position in the oversized, specially-made railed crib.

He remembered creeping down the bunk ladder, padding the stairs barefoot, for what reason he no longer recalled. Had there been a reason then, it must have fled his mind as he reached the hallway and halted to shrink against the newel post and listen. *Mary, we must send Jamie away to be with his own kind.*

He is with his kind. He is with his family.

We must put him away where he can be properly cared for. He will never be right, Mary. He will never be better.

No! He will be all right. He must be all right. I will make him all right. We will all make Jamie all right. . . . As if his mother had accused herself of the unfortunate birth of Jamie and was, in turn, dividing the blame and shedding it upon the members of the family to share and heal. . . . *All of us together will see that Jamie is safe and happy and well.*

He stood in the cold and flickering light of the kitchen, upturned coat collar scratching his neck, remembering the words, the prognostication that all life in this house and within this family would revolve around Jamie as the earth revolves about the sun.

He picked up his tray of light and moved from the kitchen along the hall, slowly because of the precarious tilt of the candles, and shivering with cold so that the flames trembled in return.

The stairs were steeper, the treads narrower than he had remembered. He looked up into blackness beyond the nimbus of light he held . . . *Joel! Gene! Each of you take Jamie's hands. Don't you dare let him climb the stairs alone . . .* and was surprised, at the top, to find the gate no longer there, the gate that must be unlatched and latched again because of Jamie. But of course there was no gate, for there was no Jamie and hadn't been since that summer day many years ago.

The upper hallway echoed with more long-ago voices, Jamie's gibberish, rounded vowels of desperate communication. *You're kiddin' (in contemptuous reply. His voice or that of his brother). . . Gene! Joel! Stop that tantalizing. Jamie's telling you to play His Game with him. Listen. It's clear as day.*

He remembered then, with revulsion, Jamie's Game, invented and instituted by his mother, a simple form of physical exercise, arms out at the side, arms forward, arms upright—him and his brother stiff and straight, arms snapping into position as if, he thought now on the stairway, to emphasize their own muscular control in contrast to Jamie's limp and flaccid interpretation.

. . . He's getting better. See! Before you know it, he'll be doing as well as you boys.

Aw, Ma, he'll never be able to do it.

You stop that kind of talk right this minute. It's that kind of talk holds Jamie back. He just isn't as strong as you boys. But he will be. You wait and see. Now play The Game.

His mother's efforts to shape Jamie, a piece of unformed clay, into a coordinated, articulate boy like his brothers were incessant and involved the entire household. Hers was a blind and deaf obsession that saw and heard progress where only a static suspension persisted. . . . *Did you see that? Her voice still floated the hallway. . . . Did you hear him? Jamie said it as plain as you and me.*

He held the flaming tray high, its flickering light revealing closed doors, on a closed past. He swayed on the top step and grabbed the newel post for balance, looking back over his shoulder down the dark well with a shudder.

He walked across the hall and pushed open the door to his and his brother's room, extending the tray of light. He half expected to see the old double-decker bunks that, of course, were not there, for one layer had been lifted off, leaving the other for the brother who stayed. The

voices in the room of his boyhood were faint and confused, the one in obstinate dissent, the other tractable and compliant. . . . *I'm sick of him. It's do-this-for-Jamie, play-Jamie's-Game. Who are we around here? Jamie's the kingpin.*

. . . It's the only place he can be kingpin. Someday maybe we can be kingpins somewhere else. But not Jamie.

He hunched his shoulders inside the coat and looked at the old room where he and his brother grew in the shadow of Jamie until Jamie died and one left and the other remained.

He backed from the room and closed the door.

With the light tray at arm's length, he groped his way along the hall and opened the door to the master bedroom where Jamie had been master in his giant railed crib. Here a voice echoed in mangled utterance from the empty space where the crib once stood. Words bounced in angry stipulation from the right side of the double bed and back again in defiant half-compromise from the left side.

. . . Look, you can't give your life, and mine too, over to Jamie. You're leaving me out. We don't do anything together any more. We don't go anyplace.

Of course we do. We go to church.

Omigod! We take Jamie with us.

And why not?

I want us to do things without Jamie. I want to enjoy things together like a married couple. The card parties. Remember the card parties we used to go to? And movies.

We don't need movies any more with our new television set. . . . A whimper from the crib no longer there and a ping of springs from the double bed. . . . Oh no you don't. You don't need to leap every time Jamie makes a sound. You listen to me and you listen good. We're going places alone. Just you and me. Once a week. You've got to get out of this house and I've got to get out of it with you. Once a week now, or else.

What about Jamie?

Let the boys watch him. They can take over a few hours each week.

He held the tray high, bringing to light the left-side sag of the double bed mattress where his mother had slept alone for the past twelve years. He closed the door and leaned against it.

He couldn't return, he told himself, remembering the front page item of his hometown paper handed to him, one of the week's supply, by his

city news vendor. It was too late by the time he read it to attend the funeral of his father and his brother, killed together in a mine explosion, and too late to remember the long-ago summer day in this hallway with the gate unlatched and Joel and Gene left to play The Game with Jamie.

. . . *I was going to the baseball field.* He heard the faint whine from the past and stepped across the hall to set the light tray on the floor and lean against the bannister. He bent over it, staring down into darkness. . . . *I've got a date.*

The baseball field will be there tomorrow and the date can wait . . . his mother speaking, her voice shrill with worry. . . . Your father insists. It's a company picnic. We won't be long. Now you take care of Jamie. Good care, hear? Keep the gates latched. Keep him amused. Don't let him get hurt.

Mary, for God's sake, let's get going.

See that he doesn't put anything in his mouth. Be nice to him. Hold his hands if you take him upstairs and keep the gates locked.

Mary. Come on.

Even now, he could hear the click of the front door as it closed behind his parents, leaving Joel and Gene with Jamie.

He stepped back, away from the bannister, hearing young voices in long pent-up comment, piping up the stairway and bursting with sound. . . . *You are an idiot. You know that?*

How can he know it if he's an idiot?

Well, I'm tellin' him.

Aw, come on, Jamie can't help it.

Neither can we. . . . The voices fading through the house.

He felt suddenly warm with the warmth of that summer day.

When there had been a breeze to whisper in the poplar leaves and sprinkle the bridal wreath about the grass, it blew over the hill behind the house and through the windows upstairs. *Let's take him upstairs . . .* he heard from below . . . *up where it's cooler . . .* and heard the scrape of the hook that unlatched the gate at the foot of the stairs and the metallic sound as it was pushed back in place, then the slow beat of rising footsteps, plodding in tempo to match Jamie's hesitant shuffle.

He picked up the tray of lights from the floor and held it high as he heard the scrape of the top gate being unlatched. He saw it swing closed with the hook hanging free just before the flame of candlelight showed him there was no gate there any more.

Let's play Jamie's Game.

Why? Ma's not here to make us.

Let's play it anyway. Sêe, Jamie wants to play it. He knows when we talk about The Game, don't you, Jamie? Jamie's strange liquid laughter bubbled through the dark of the upstairs hallway.

... First time you ever wanted to do anything with Jamie.

Ma told us to amuse him. So let's do what she told us. Okay, Jamie, you stand there. Right there now, with your back to the gate. Look, I'll put you where you're supposed to stand. There. That's right.

Why there? That's a nutty place for him to stand.

What's nutty about it? This is the wide part of the hall here at the top of the stairs, and we can stand side by side without hittin' each other and show him how to do it.

Oh, for Pete's sake.

Now, arms out, arms forward, arms high. Snap it up. Come on, Jamie, stop wobbling. Put a little push into it. There now, that's ...

... JAMIE!

He rocked with his brother's long-ago cry of alarm, and the candle tray rocked with him, sending flickering beams of light crazily dancing along the walls. He could still hear the crash of the upstairs gate as it burst open with Jamie's backward plunge. He listened to the thud of Jamie's body as it struck every step before crumpling to rest against the securely latched downstairs gate.

He turned away from the memory of his mother's screams upon finding her lastborn, her unfortunate one over whom she could no longer hover, for whom she could no longer hope. He tried again to forget her malevolence, her accusations, her outraged withdrawal from the others as she crouched over the body to stare across dead Jamie at his enemies, his father and brothers. *You took me away. You made me go and leave him alone ...*

... Now, Mary. Now, Mary.

... Leave him alone with his brothers. Which one of you brothers left the gate unlatched?

She looked up from Jamie with an expression he had never seen before—there and gone again—blanked out in his mind.

... It was him, Ma. He forgot to latch the gate. He heard the words as he had heard them for almost thirty years, searching for something left out, something forgotten. Whenever he slept, whenever he dreamed, he

heard those words and did not know whether it was he who made the accusation or his brother.

All he remembered was his mother's question: *Which one of you left the gate unlatched?* and forgot her expression as she looked up from accidental death. He heard the answer: *It was him, Ma*, but did not know who gave it.

He carried the lighted tray to the end of the hall and opened up the last door onto his mother's sewing room where he found the knocked-down oversized crib and the two gates stacked against the wall. Like memories in a memory room, he thought at first; then he thought of whips in a torture room, sins in a confessional, and set down the tray of lighted candles. Some of the stubs had sputtered into spread tallow heaps, but others still flamed and lit up the memory room; the confessional, the torture room, perhaps all three. . . . *Now, Mary. Now, Mary* . . . he remembered his father's placation.

. . . . *You made me go and leave him alone with his brothers.* . . . *Which one of you brothers left the gate unlatched?* and she looked up from the death of Jamie with an expression of peace, of naked deliverance.

He saw it. He remembered seeing it, turning quickly to speak the words: *It was him, Ma. Gene forgot to latch the gate* . . . not to switch sin from himself to his brother but to lift the blame of his mother's guilty relief from his own young shoulders.

He picked up the tray and held it high, lighting up the crib and the gates, stuffed toys, cloth books, and blocks. Idols, icons, charms for a necklace. Now he knew.

He had filled in the spaces, understood the expression, and supplied the missing word. By destroying one brother, betraying another, he had revealed, for one flashing instant, his mother's Great Lie.

He turned away from the room and closed the door.

He walked along the hall, the tray lighting his footsteps, and descended the stairs.

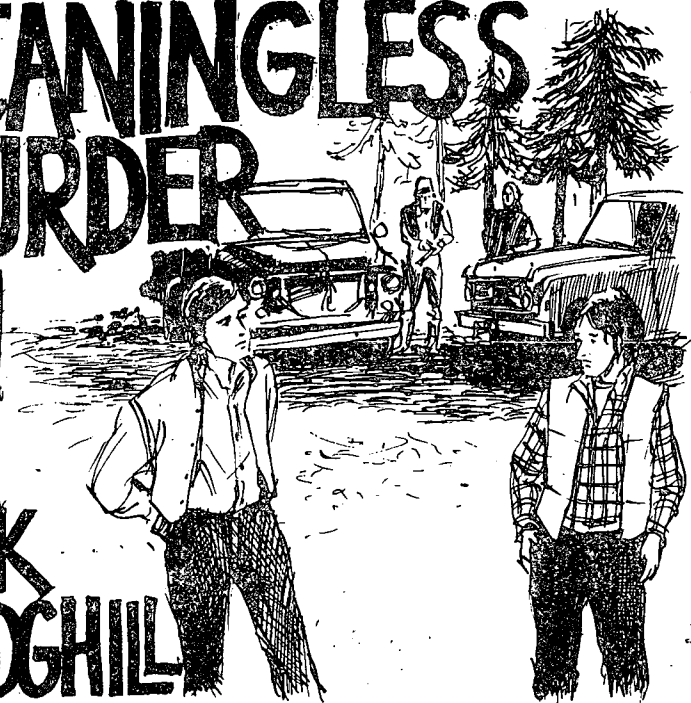
He took the tray to the kitchen and blew the candles to extinction, remembering birthday candles blown out with wishes, but he had no wishes—he had used them all up.

In his car, he turned on the motor and flicked on the windshield wipers because he thought it was raining on this starlit winter night.

The only way to find Earl, Hal Blinn thought, was not to ask where he was.

MEANINGLESS MURDER

by
**DICK
STODGHILL**



The Oar House, named after a couple of canoe paddles that hang over the entrance, is about what I expect. A long room with a bar on one side and booths on the other. Dim lights, the jukebox playing country: a mournful admission that now and then there's such a fool as I. Half my beer is still inside the Falstaff bottle and already it's played three times, courtesy of a man at the end of the bar who keeps feeding in coins and pressing the same buttons.

I study him surreptitiously. He wears the haunted look that spells woman trouble as clearly as if it were stamped on his forehead. It's a familiar story, I'm sure. One that's been repeated a million times, but that doesn't ease his pain. Another man, maybe, or perhaps he tried a little tomcatting himself and got caught. Whatever, to him the story is brand new and the wound is raw.

Another man, headed for the restroom, says to him, "Hi, Earl," and he nods in return. Our eyes meet and I look away. He's the trouble some people go looking for, but I'm not one of them. The hair style, the lean look of the hills, something in his bearing, all tell me he is from the small Tennessee town that sends half its native sons to Midland in search of the big bucks in the factories. I'm in long-knife territory and that's not my sport.

The Oar House is a favorite south side hangout of the Tennesseans. Live music on Friday and Saturday, fights any night of the week.

I decide to finish my beer, then take my drinking habit uptown where I feel more comfortable. The place is slowly filling up with men and women who will never be at home on the plains of Central Indiana, will never stop yearning for the rocky hills, piney forests, rushing streams. Good men, hard workers, but with a different set of values from mine, a pride so easily affronted that even their casual friendliness warns others that a wrong word, a wrong look at their woman, means trouble.

As I take a final swallow of beer I sense a new tension in the man called Earl. His eyes are riveted on the latest arrivals, a man and woman laughing intimately together as they walk arm in arm to a booth. The woman casts a sidelong glance at Earl, enjoying her triumph and his torment. His eyes don't waver from her but there is a subtle change in them, one she either doesn't see or doesn't heed.

I slide the empty bottle to the inside of the bar, the universal signal for another. I tell myself this is what a newspaperman is paid to do. Study human nature, human responses, the interaction of personalities and events that in themselves create new events. Where else does the material come from, the grist for the insatiable appetite of a daily column? But somewhere in my head a voice is saying, "It isn't 'Around Town with Hal Blinn' you're thinking about, you're just nosy."

The new arrivals share one side of a booth. Heads together, still laughing quietly as they order drinks, exchanging banter with the waitress, ignoring the man alone at the bar. They're aware of him, though. He's

being teased, baited, and even that fool in the song would recognize their performance for what it is.

Several moments pass. The jukebox winds down, the tension in Earl doesn't. He gets up suddenly, walks to the booth and for a few seconds stands looking down at its occupants. The explosion I am braced for doesn't come. Instead Earl sits down across from them and talks quietly to the woman, ignoring the other man.

The woman seems amused by what is happening, savoring her power over him. They are too far away for me to hear what is being said but I pick up scattered words—divorce, kids, sick baby, need you, never again.

The explosion finally occurs, but not in the way I anticipated. The woman picks up her drink, and throws it in Earl's face. A hush falls over the room, all eyes are on the one booth.

Earl doesn't react, just sits unmoving as the liquid drips from his face to his shirt. The woman laughs again, but it is shrill and hollow and her facial muscles have tightened. The other man also is motionless, wearing a stunned expression. Then, when Earl does nothing, his smile spreads slowly.

The seconds pass interminably. Finally Earl gets up without a word, walks to a side door and on outside. The tension drains away and I realize another song is playing on the jukebox, something about going ninety miles an hour down a dead-end street. I leave a nearly full bottle and head uptown.

The story in the *Morning Sun* is a bare-bones account, written at deadline with little time to gather facts. A woman stabbed to death in the parking lot at the Oar House. A police search for her husband, James Earl Hartley, who had been arguing with her in the tavern and had followed her outside. So Earl had gone back.

I push the paper aside, no longer interested in the other news. I want more information so I gulp my coffee, go back upstairs to my rooms for a few minutes, then walk the two blocks from the old hotel to the *News-Banner*.

Steve Granger, who covers the police beat, is already out on his rounds so I go to the city desk and ask Jake Richards if there's anything new on the murder.

"Granger's out checking," he says without looking up.

"Have they arrested the husband?"

He looks up now, reaching for one of the two cigarettes burning in his ashtray. "I said Granger's out checking. Go bug somebody else, Hal—somebody who doesn't have work to do."

"I saw the woman and her husband at the Oar House a little while before it happened. She threw—"

"But you left before the murder?"

"Right, but . . . You're not interested in my story, are you, Jake?"

"I will be when you have one."

Old grouch, I think to myself, and decide to hit the street. At eight in the morning that means the Backstage Bar where the beat reporters will be drinking black coffee, comparing stories on the night before, complaining about Jake, their jobs, their pay.

Grady Driscoll and Gloria Thompson sit morosely at a table with five dirty cups. I tell my story but they are unmoved. A court bailiff joins us so I tell it again. Driscoll squirms impatiently and begins talking about the trial he'll be covering when court convenes. Gloria leaves to cover some function at the college just as Granger walks in.

"Have they caught Hartley?" I ask.

"Picked him up at a bar over on Madison an hour after it happened."

"Has he admitted doing it?"

"Not yet, but he will. There were thirty witnesses."

"In the parking lot at midnight?"

He sighs resignedly. "Of course not, but they saw them arguing inside and saw him follow her out and his knife was in the body. Why are you interested, anyway?"

I repeat my story. Driscoll leaves as I begin and when I'm finished Granger shrugs and follows him.

Late in the afternoon I find the three of them again at a table in the back room of Horner's Tavern. Jake is with them, his eyes red and glassy from the beer he's been drinking for two hours. Jack Horner brings a fresh round and sits down so I tell him my story after learning from Granger that Hartley still hasn't confessed.

Driscoll sighs when I finish. "You know, Hal, this isn't a classic mystery. It's not even very interesting. Everybody knows the who, what, where, when, and how, so suppose you quit talking and start writing—tell the readers *why*. That's a columnist's job, isn't it?"

While I'm framing a sharp retort, Jake sits nodding his head. When my mouth opens he holds up his hand and says, "He's right, Hal. You're

getting to be one of those newsmen who knows everything that's going on, but talking about it with your cronies satisfies you: You never get around to writing it. If a reporter knows more than the readers, nine times out of ten he isn't doing his job."

The annoying thing is I know he's right. Nobody's going to get me to admit it, though, so I get up and leave, walk two blocks to the jail, then wonder what I'm doing in the place. Had Hartley confessed, they might let me talk to him. Since he hasn't, my chances are slim.

The outer office is crowded. I ask a county policeman the reason and he says the people are Hartley's friends and relatives. He points out Hartley's sister and a minister—a man who looks like he might grab you by the arm and say, "Brother, are you saved?"

They haven't a prayer of seeing Hartley and I have only one, a press-conscious sheriff. When the chance comes, I take Joe McAuliffe aside and state my case. He slips a finger inside his collar and moves his head around. "Jeez, Hal, I don't know . . . let me see what I can do."

He walks away, then returns a few minutes later with Greg Staley, a city detective who knows me. I tell him why I want to see Hartley and he surprises me by saying, "Sure, why not? You can have five minutes, but only because I figure you have enough sense not to blow the case some way."

McAuliffe escorts me to an interrogation room, making sure I'm aware of the big favor he's doing me. A few minutes later he hustles Hartley in the door. He's surprisingly well-groomed but looks haggard, more like forty than twenty-seven.

He recognizes me. "You were in the Oar House last night, right?"

"You have a good memory."

"I knew who you were, I've seen your picture in the paper. What do you want?"

"They tell me you deny killing your wife."

"I loved her. Why would I kill her?"

"If you didn't, any idea who did?"

"Why do you want to know?"

The way he's countering questions, he should have been a politician or a salesman rather than a factory worker. An intelligent man with the distrust of strangers common among hill people.

"It's my job," I tell him. "What happened when you left the tavern?"

"I was trying to make Flo see some sense but she wasn't interested so

I gave it up and drove over to Fat Frank's for another drink. That's where they picked me up."

"Where was she when you left?"

"By her car, rummaging through her purse for her keys."

When my five minutes are up I still have no idea what's going on inside Hartley's head. I have material for a column, but not the one Jake and Driscoll were talking about. To know why Florence Hartley died, I'll have to talk to more people, piece it together myself. I decide to start with his sister.

The house on South Elm is old and large, uncared for, past its prime. A boy about four answers my knock, a girl a year younger peers at me over his shoulder. Wanda Hartley follows them from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. I explain my business and she sizes me up warily, then gives a little shrug and invites me inside.

I guess her age at thirty-five. Tall, but twenty pounds overweight. No makeup, hair pulled back in a severe style. Clean, but beyond that unconcerned about her appearance.

She orders the children upstairs and they obey without argument. When we are settled on old overstuffed chairs she cautiously answers a few preliminary questions. She has lived with her brother since shortly after the boy was born, has always cared for the two youngsters and a year-old baby girl who has been sick since birth. Before that she had her own place, worked in a factory since coming to Midland from Tennessee twelve years ago. She was laid off and moved in with Earl and Florence, became a full-time nanny because Florence kept on the go, never had time for the children.

I try to butter her up through the children, compliment her on their behavior and neat appearance, but she isn't having any of it. Her suspicious attitude is inbred, can't be overcome, so I have nothing to lose by being blunt.

"Florence wasn't a good wife or mother, was she?"

Her lips compress, she starts to say something but stops. Then: "It's wrong to speak ill of the dead."

"But Earl tried to make her take more interest in the kids?"

"Of course. My brother's a fine man, a good father."

"But without you, things never would have gotten on here?"

"I've done my best."

The conversation sounds like a lawyer examining a witness, but a judge wouldn't allow my leading questions. Without them, though, I'd learn nothing.

"Earl claims he didn't kill Florence. Any idea who might have?"

She grunts, then says, "Half the men south of the tracks. And their wives."

I grin, although she hasn't meant to be funny. "Anyone specific?"

"I've kept my nose out of their business." She pauses, thinking, deciding whether to say more. "Bradley Scruggs, he's the latest."

That would be the boyfriend. A good candidate, unless he was still in the tavern when it happened. And, remembering Wanda's words, Bradley's wife.

"How about Earl? Maybe he just had more than he could take."

She looks away, hesitates a second or two. "No. My brother's a gentle man, a God-fearing man."

"Why'd he carry a knife?"

"Because every man and boy down home carries a knife. He never used it, never even marked anybody."

"Marked anybody?"

"Put his mark on them—cut just deep enough to leave a scar but not do any real damage. You've seen a man point to another and say, 'That's my mark,' haven't you?"

I shake my head. "How can they be sure they won't cut too deep?"

She looks around for something, settles on a knitting needle and picks it up. "By holding their thumb right near the tip of the blade like this."

Just fun and games, a little sport of an evening. We talk another few minutes, then I leave without having learned anything specific other than the name of the boyfriend. I've picked up a lot, though, have a better feel of things in general about a way of life. I want no part of.

Bradley Scruggs's house on Twelfth Street is only a few blocks from Hartley's. Scruggs and his wife are finishing supper when I arrive. I suggest talking to him alone but Audrey Scruggs has other ideas. "It's about that woman, isn't it?" she says, and there is no doubt what woman she means. Her husband has a hangdog look, not at all the gay romancer of the previous night.

"Were you at the Oar House when Florence Hartley was murdered?" I ask him.

"No, I left a couple hours before."

"How long had you been dating Florence?"

"Never dated her," he mumbles. "Just ran into her now and then and had a drink or two."

"Yeah," Audrey says scornfully. "He just ran into her every day the past six months."

"Now that ain't true, honey," he whines.

"Don't 'honey' me," she answers, giving him a scathing look. Then, to me, "Ask the great lover about the packed suitcase in the back of his closet."

"Now, honey, I told you I figured on having to make a business trip, then forgot to unpack when it was called off."

Talking as if he's somewhere else she says, "Factories send shop workers on business trips all the time, don't they, mister?"

"I meant for the lodge," he says. Enough of this, I decide, and leave.

The Reverend Harlan Fleecé is alone in the small house next to his frame church not far from the Oar House. He talks as I expect: Midland is good, his "children" are good despite occasional backsliding by a few, and, although he doesn't come out and say so, he is good. Only I am suspect.

He's fat and fortyish, his clothes are rumpled and not too clean. Still, he has a certain charm, a magnetism that undoubtedly serves him well with some people. He describes Florence Hartley as a good Christian woman, a fine wife and mother. The lie of his words shows on my face so he adds, "Misguided at times, perhaps. Misguided."

"Who was doing the guiding, you?"

His cheeks and fat jowls flush a little. "I tried to be her spiritual guide, of course. Her spiritual guide, nothing more, although I'm sure some people . . ."

"Some people what?"

"Some people may say differently, those who jump to the wrong conclusions and read evil intent into perfect normal . . ." Again he fades out. The conversation isn't to his liking.

I take a guess and say, "You mean the talk about Florence coming here alone a lot?"

"Exactly. It was all perfectly natural. She was in the choir and we often got together to plan the musical programs."

"But Earl didn't like it?"

"On the contrary, he approved wholeheartedly. He was glad to see her taking an interest in the church."

"Until recently, you mean?"

"And then it was only malicious gossip that, that . . ."

"Suppose Florence decided to tell all?"

"Why would she . . . I mean what would she have told?"

He suddenly realizes I've been guessing, just priming the pump, and I can see there will be nothing more forthcoming.

It's after nine when I walk into Horner's and only Driscoll is in the back room. "Hear the news?" he asks, and when I shake my head, "You know the new outdoor recreation area back of the jail? Well, they let Hartley out for a little fresh air, left him alone a minute, and he decided to exercise by climbing the fence."

"He escaped? He's free?"

"As a bird."

The news disturbs me and, for some reason, does what all the talk failed to do—makes me think Hartley may be innocent.

Catching him the second time proves more difficult than the first. By the second morning after his escape everyone is convinced he has managed to make his way back to the hills around Flintville. I'm relieved because I had feared he might be set on taking his own revenge.

I try to interest myself in other matters but my mind doesn't cooperate. Even my favorite lunch, a bowl of Jack Horner's hot chili with a tall beer to put out the fire, fails to distract me from the plan I've been kicking around, one that doesn't really make good sense. Despite that, I decide to go ahead with it as I drain the last of the beer.

Deadline has passed and Jake is leaning back with a cup of coffee and a cigarette as I walk into the newsroom. I tell him, "Jake, I want to go to Tennessee."

"They say it's nice in June. A little fishing, a hike in the Smokies, browsing around Gatlinburg, the Grand Old Opry."

"You know what I'm talking about, Jake. I want to go to Flintville and try to find Earl Hartley."

He chuckles derisively. "They wouldn't even talk to you down there, you wouldn't get to first base. Of course you might manage to get yourself shot."

"I think I'd have a chance. Even if I didn't, it'd make a good column or two."

"Forget it, Hal. Advertising's down, the budget's tight, the company isn't okaying trips to Indianapolis to cover the legislature, let alone wild goose chases in Tennessee."

As usual he's right, and I'd figured on a turndown. "Okay, I'll go on my own. Starting tomorrow I'm on vacation."

Jake sighs, shaking his head. "It's your money, Hal."

He's also right about people in Flintville not talking to me, or any nosy stranger. If Hartley's hiding up in the hills they'll know it, but an outsider isn't going to find him. The sheriff down there might, if it was important enough, but then again he might not.

I go back to Horner's and think about it over coffee. John Morgan comes to mind, a tough Flintville native who served five years hard time at Pendleton. He heads up a program for ex-cons and I've given it some exposure when no one else was interested.

Morgan's at home when I phone so I drive out. When I leave half an hour later I've got a head full of information, a few old sticks, and his spare knife. I'm pleased with the information but not thrilled about the knife.

At the hotel I toss a few things in a suitcase and hurry downstairs, figuring the long June days will enable me to make Flintville by dark. As I start out the revolving door, Driscoll starts in from the opposite side. I keep going and so does he, in a circle back to the sidewalk.

"Hold it, Hal," he calls. "I'm going along."

"No, you're not, Grady," I say over my shoulder, still walking toward the car. "Everything's planned and you don't fit in." I should have expected it. Everywhere I go, Driscoll tags along or turns up. Either he thinks I'm incapable of handling a situation alone or is afraid of missing something, I'm not sure which.

He hurries to overtake me, the spare tire around his waist jiggling. "We'll go by my place. It'll only take a minute to get what I need."

I stop and face him. "You're not going, Grady. How do you even know about it?"

"Jake told me." He tugs on my arm and says, "C'mon, if you quit wasting time we can make it by dark."

Driscoll chatters on about nothing for a while, then falls silent until we

are south of Indianapolis on I-65. As we near the Franklin exit he asks, "What are you trying to accomplish, Hal?"

"I'm not sure. I want to talk to Hartley again."

"Still looking for the 'why'?"

"I guess. There's more to the story than that, though, but I'm not sure what it is."

"You're not crazy enough to think he didn't do it?"

I look at him and grin. He snorts and turns to stare at the passing cornfields.

When we leave the interstate at Glasgow we still have a hundred miles to travel on a state highway that twists and turns through the hills of Kentucky, then Tennessee. That's when I lay down the ground rules for Driscoll, tell him he is to go his own way while we are in Flintville but isn't to pump the residents for information. I have little hope that he'll pay any attention.

The headlights have been on for half an hour when we reach Flintville but there is enough daylight to see it's about what I expected of a town of two thousand tucked away in the hills. At that it's the biggest town for miles around so the business district covers several blocks. Most of the buildings date back sixty or eighty years and few are higher than two stories. An ancient courthouse towers over everything. Aside from a few young toughs milling around in front of the theater, the streets are nearly deserted.

Finding Flintville's only hotel is no problem. It's an old three-story building with a roof supported by wooden pillars extending over the sidewalk. Wooden benches line the wall under the overhang. A few loungers eye us without comment.

Several more occupy chairs in the small lobby, interested in us but not showing it. The man at the desk is lean and surly, but he erases my fear of having to share a bed with Driscoll by saying a room with twins is available. He also tells us a restaurant two blocks away is still open so we freshen up and head for it.

Driscoll starts for a booth but I take a stool at the counter. He backtracks and joins me, grumbling.

The lone waitress leaves the only other customer and stands in front of us. Life hasn't been easy for her and it shows. She's curious, though, and after turning in our orders comes back and says, "You fellas from outta town?"

I nod and say, "From Midland, Indiana."

Her scrawny, lined face brightens. "I've got friends up in Midland. You know my brother, Kenny James?"

I shake my head. "You know Earl Hartley?"

A guarded look comes over her. "You guys ain't cops, are you? You don't look like cops."

"No, we're not cops. I know Earl and need to talk to him. Who're his friends?"

"Don't ask me. Didn't ever know him much, he was young when he took off north." She starts away, then stops. A scornful look, a sniffing, nose-in-the-air look, replaces the one of distrust. "I knowed his sister, though—Miss High and Mighty."

"Wanda? You didn't like Wanda?"

"Nobody liked Wanda. Nobody liked her uppity ways. Always acting like she was better'n everybody. The whole town was laughing, believe me, when she went and got herself pregnant."

"Wanda? I didn't know she has a child."

"She don't, it died aborning. Then Wanda hightailed it outta town."

When she walks away, Driscoll asks what the talk was all about. I tell him about Wanda and that it really wasn't about much of anything.

After eating, we go to a bar down the street, have a couple of drinks, but don't talk to anyone. We have been sized up by the few regulars on hand but none makes an overture. Not even the bartender, who talks about the weather and then leaves us alone. Driscoll can't understand why I don't corner somebody and ask questions.

"I've been coached," I finally tell him. "Just drink and be quiet." He sulks until we go back to the hotel.

When we have finished breakfast at the same restaurant, I send Driscoll off on his own after warning him to stay out of trouble, then walk back to the hotel. Half a dozen men already are lounging on the benches, several of them whittling. I lean against one of the pillars by the curb, my back to them. After a few minutes I take John Morgan's knife and one of the sticks he has given me from my pocket, open the blade, and take a few swipes at the stick, feeling foolish and selfconscious.

Half an hour passes and I am ready to give up, convinced the ploy recommended by Morgan is far too obvious. Only his warning that any direct approach will meet with a rebuff keeps me at it. The sun, already

high in the sky, is warm and I am considering moving to a shady spot when a slim, hard-eyed fellow of about thirty eases up beside me and says, "Take a look at yer knife?"

I nod and hand it to him. He examines it closely, turning it over again and again, studying every detail. To me it looks pretty much like any other knife. Finally he hands it back, nodding, too, apparently in approval. "Knowed a fella once had one like it," he says.

"Got yours?" I ask, trying to sound casual, knowing darn well he'd go out without his pants before his knife.

He takes it out and hands it to me. I follow his example, wondering what it is I'm supposed to be looking at. After enough turns and re-examinations, I nod sagely and give it back. A moment or two pass in silence, then I look up at the cloudless sky and say, "Nice day."

He looks up, too, and says, "Yeah." More time passes with each of us glancing up at the sky every so often. I close the knife and put it away, check the sky one more time, and say, "Lookin' for Earl Hartley. Know him?"

"Might."

"Talked to him the other day. Like to talk to him again."

"Friend?"

"He knows me. Like for somebody to tell him Hal Blinn wants to talk to him."

"That you?"

Conserving words obviously is a virtue in Flintville so I nod. "Be around later?" he asks, and I nod again, then he walks away.

I sit on a bench till noon, whittling a little now and then, but no one else approaches. I wonder what Driscoll's been up to and expect to find him at the restaurant, but don't. The waitress from the night before serves me a hamburger without being too friendly, then I go back to the hotel and lean against the pillar again.

An hour goes by and I'm getting bored and restless. A foolish waste of time, I think, and consider forgetting the whole thing.

When a battered pickup truck stops in front of me, it takes me a few seconds to recognize the man behind the wheel as the one I talked to earlier. "Take a ride?" he asks. I nod and climb in beside him.

He drives out of town on the highway, then follows side roads on a twisting route deep into the hills. After half an hour and about six miles, he stops in a clearing surrounded by tall pines and we get out. Neither

of us has spoken and it continues that way.

More waiting, more standing around. For Earl Hartley, I assume, but don't ask. My hard-eyed driver leans against a fender, takes out his knife, and begins notching a stick. I remember times when I've felt more at ease.

The sound of an engine in the distance breaks the silence, grows steadily louder until another pickup appears and pulls into the clearing. The lanky, darkhaired driver gets out and takes the same position as my own against a fender. Earl Hartley climbs from the passenger's side, walks toward me, and stops six feet away. I feel safe enough but this isn't a gathering I'd care to stumble on by accident.

I nod and say, "Earl."

"Hear you wanna talk more, Blinn."

Again I nod, beginning to feel natural doing it.

"What about?"

"I saw Wanda and Bradley Scruggs. Talked to the minister, too—Harlan Fleece."

Hartley snorts and the three men exchange sneering grins. I'm not sure which name was responsible.

"Who killed her, Earl?"

He shakes his head and looks away.

"Why'd you run off? You can't hide up here forever."

He turns back, shrugs his shoulders, then says, "You got influence, Blinn?"

"Not much. Why?"

"I don't want the kids with Wanda any more."

The statement catches me off guard. After a long pause I ask, "Why?" Hartley shakes his head again. "Can you fix it?"

"Maybe. I can talk to people . . . it'd mean the Children's Home."

He nods this time. "Lemme know tomorrow."

He turns and starts for his truck but stops when I say, "Then what, Earl?"

"Then maybe I'll go back." He goes on to the truck, the interview is over.

Only when we are on our way back to town do I realize he has answered all my questions. I should have figured it out for myself. If you accept the fact that Earl didn't kill Florence, that leaves only one person who would have had access to his knife. It also explains why he didn't take his

own revenge, as I had thought he might.

I'm missing one piece of information, though. I still can't write a column explaining why.

I dial three numbers before tracking down Greg Staley. After hearing my story he warns me I'm flirting with a charge of harboring a fugitive. I laugh at that, and think I even hear a chuckle from him. He tells me he'll see what he can do, lays down a couple of conditions, and promises to call back by early the next afternoon.

He asks why, of course. I'm not lying when I answer, "Hartley didn't say."

I find Driscoll in the lobby. He is close-mouthed about where he's been all day and I don't press him. I tell him what's been going on, leaving out only my own conclusions.

The evening begins like the previous one—supper at the same restaurant, a walk down the street to the same bar. This time, to our surprise, it's crowded. Every table is occupied, no one is talking, all eyes are on us. We find stools at one end of the bar and order beer.

When the bartender sets them in front of us he quietly says, "Drink your drinks, don't say anything to anybody, then walk out the door."

"What's going on?" Driscoll asks softly.

"It's 'stomp night.' Every other night of the week we're open late but tonight we'll be closed by nine thirty, the sheriff'll see to that. They're waiting to pick out somebody to stomp and up till now you're the best candidates."

The beer doesn't taste as good as I thought it would. I'm trying to decide whether it would be smarter to make a dash for it or walk out casually when the door opens and a little guy wearing a big cowboy hat walks in. Somebody says, "Well, hiyuh, Tex," and everybody laughs. Without exchanging a word, Driscoll and I get up and slip out quietly.

The call from Staley comes just after lunch. "It wasn't easy," he says. "The welfare director and Judge Main cooperated, though, after I explained the situation. A 'children in need of services' petition was filed, the judge heard it immediately, and the kids have been picked up and are at the home. Now try to hold up your end of the bargain."

The pickup appears on schedule and we repeat the trip of the day before. This time Hartley is waiting. He stares, arms folded, until I say,

"It's been handled."

His reply is the usual nod.

"I want you to go back with me, Earl."

He grins. "Figured on doin' that."

We arrive in Midland a little after midnight—the *Morning Sun's* deadline. I had called ahead and Staley is waiting in a parking lot at the edge of town. We follow them to the jail, then I drop Driscoll at his apartment.

A dim light burns somewhere inside the house but when I knock there is no response. I turn the knob and the door opens. Wanda Hartley sits alone in a dark corner, staring from dull, rounded eyes.

Seconds tick away on a mantel clock. "I thought you might come," she finally says.

I pull a chair around and sit facing her from a few feet away. "You know, then?"

"I had a feeling you'd figure it out. I heard about you talking to people." After a pause she continues, louder, "She was going to run off with that no-good Scruggs. I heard them talking on the phone, I knew what they were up to. I couldn't let her take the children away from me like that."

"But why hang it on Earl?"

"I didn't really mean to. But you know, *he* would have taken them away, too. He'd been talking about it, about taking the children and going back to Flintville."

"You could have gone along. He'd have needed someone to take care of them."

"Never!" she says angrily, eyes flashing. "I'd never go back to that place. All those women with their little minds and their evil tongues that never stop wagging as long as there's somebody to hurt. In those little towns they never let you forget."

She's probably right. But I don't think Earl would have gone back, either. He would have stayed in Midland and could have gotten custody of the kids. He wouldn't have needed to, though—I'd bet my last dollar that Florence had no intention of taking them along. If she even intended to go, which is doubtful. Everything that's happened has been for nothing. A meaningless murder.

"We have to set things straight, Wanda. I'll go with you. You won't have trouble, they'll treat you okay."

She nods dispiritedly, not caring any more. "I know. Earl has to get out so he can take the children out of that place." The tears finally come. She covers her face with both hands and sobs quietly, her body shaking spasmodically. "God, when I think of them being there, being in a place like that"

It's eight in the morning when I finish my column, one that's twice the length of the usual twenty inches. In addition, Steve Granger has written the story of Wanda's arrest and the events in Tennessee from information I've supplied. I am bone weary but rather than head for the hotel and bed, I pour a cup of coffee and wait for Jake's reaction.

There is none. When I know he has finished reading and released the column to the composing room, I walk over and say, "Okay, Jake?"

He waves impatiently with one hand and says, "Fine, fine."

"I was tired. Do you think I touched all the bases?"

"I said it was fine, Hal. Go to bed."

I turn and have taken a few steps, figuring that 'fine' is as far as Jake intends to go with compliments, when he says, "Hal."

I stop and look back. He continues, "I didn't turn you in for vacation. You've been on payroll status."

"What about expenses?"

"Hal, why do you always have to press your luck?" he says, scowling. Then, after I've taken a few more steps, "Turn in a voucher and I'll see what I can do."

I don't see Driscoll until late afternoon. He's alone at a table in the back room of Horner's and motions toward a chair. "You did a good job, Hal," he says.

I sigh with relief. I didn't know how he'd take all this, wondered if he'd be mad because I hadn't told him my conclusions, let him be in on the finish.

I order a Bushmills for each of us and when they arrive he takes a long drink, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yes, you did a good job. Of course you wouldn't have done a damn thing if I hadn't pushed you into it."

Same old Driscoll I think, chuckling. And he's probably right, too.

The doctor was a brilliant cardiologist and the people of Burnt Pines needed him. But his wife was having second thoughts.

THE RING



by

J.K.
THORPE

She heard David answer the phone on the first buzz. He must have been walking past it on his way out the door.

"Dr. Berman," he said. Someday, just once, she'd like to hear him say "hello" like the rest of the world.

"Oh, sure," he continued. "No—wait. It's my anniversary this weekend. Sorry, Sam."

Isn't that sweet. Lisabeth rolled onto her belly and jammed the pillow

over her head. He has an anniversary. All by himself. I wonder if Sam noticed it.

In a few moments she heard the door slam, the sound muffled by the pillow, and then the Mercedes start smoothly. Lisabeth dozed off again. It was three hours before she was awakened by the pale sunlight in her eyes. She sat up in bed, blinking, hating what she saw. The huge windows showed off a landscape she found bleak and alien: miles of dry scrub interrupted by knobby hills. There was an occasional twisted pine. It never looked any different: November, except for the thin frost now melting off the sage, was no more sparse than June. But David enjoyed views, and, like his anniversary, this was his house.

Shivering, she threw off her silk pajamas and pulled on slacks and a heavy sweater. The house was solar heated and kept at a comfortable 70°, but she was always cold. David said it was the female condition: cold, constipated, and crabby.

Maybe she should just leave him. Right now. Pack up all her clothes and jewelry—jewelry she hadn't had a chance to wear, ever since they'd moved up here. This idiot little cow town. An hour or two to pack, then out to her Volvo and head south, like the birds.

She laughed grimly. Sure, head south, and then what? Lisabeth was not good at making her own nests. For that matter, she mused as she sipped her coffee and munched on an English muffin, David wasn't much in the nest-building line, either. It just looked that way. This wasn't a nest; it was a beautifully architected cage.

The phone again. Ellen Schwarz.

"The new line of Pantis came in? Marvelous! Though I can't imagine who you think's going to buy them, besides me, that is. Yes, I want that mauve gabardine. David and I are going to San Francisco for—" she hesitated—"my anniversary." It felt good. She grinned. "No, save them for me. I can't come in today; have to do the billing.

"You sure were smart, avoiding the doctor's wife-secretary business. Next time, I'll marry a pathologist. God, Ellen, I hate this stuff. One more insurance form and— No, it's okay. I'm fine. I'd better get started. See you."

She wandered from the huge kitchen into the equally huge living room. David must have thought they'd fill this big house with kids, dogs, bears—what? It would be a great skating rink.

She pulled on a second, heavier sweater and took her Mr. Coffee and

a mug to the work table. David was being marvelously successful, anyhow. The first two years in San Diego hadn't gone well. He was just out of training, and the place was rife with cardiologists. If you ever have an M.I., David used to say, have it in a San Diego restaurant; you'll get great care.

But here, in this God-forsaken desert town, he was grossing over half a million dollars his first year.

"Well, of course," he was in the habit of saying proudly. "I went over the statistics. You get an older population in these small towns; all the young people leave. Why, in the 120 square miles around Burnt Pines, there are eighty thousand people over the age of fifty. And don't tell me that every single one of them won't need a cardiologist at some point."

Lisabeth sighed. Eighty thousand people over the age of fifty. The way David acted—with his computer and his tax shelters and his money market funds—you ought to make that eighty thousand and one.

And she was only twenty-nine. Attractive, exquisite taste. She stared at herself defiantly in the mirrored wall next to the big stone fireplace. Not attractive; lovely! She marched back to the bedroom and selected pale woollen slacks, a matching hand-crafted sweater with bits of ribbon woven in, half a dozen gold chains, and an ivory and gold bracelet. She fastened ivory earrings with gold posts in her small ear lobes and found her favorite snake ring, a free-form jade one, and the one that matched the earrings and bracelet.

All set to do David's accounts!

She smiled grimly at her dazzling reflection and went back to the work table.

No wonder the money rolled in. She leafed through the bills and insurance forms. Fifty dollars for a cardiogram. Three hundred for an echocardiogram. A whopping five hundred for angiography. And a grand slam—\$750—for a heart scan with David's new gamma camera.

Oh, he was good. Brilliant, they'd said; should have gone into research. And he'd found some extraordinary things here in Burnt Pines. More pathology, he said, than anyone had dreamed of. He had even given one or two talks to present his results—not that he had a lot of respect for his colleagues; medical hicks, he called them.

Lisabeth had had to index the slides, showing, mostly, abnormal echocardiograms. They looked, to her, like scribbles by an untalented but compulsive two-year-old.

"I.H.S.S.," David would intone professorially. "Idiopathic hypertrophic subaortic stenosis. Often no symptoms and only a subtle murmur, but it must be followed: there's a high incidence of arrhythmias. It's an echo diagnosis: echo picks it up when nothing else can. Next slide. Mitral valve prolapse. Same thing, echo diagnosis. You follow these every three to six months, depending on the echo. Again, no symptoms in most cases."

Sam Schwarz, at one of the talks, had asked David about the high incidence of disease.

"I've been doing autopsies in this county for four years," Sam had pointed out, "and I can't remember a case of I.H.S.S."

"Fascinating," David had been enthusiastic. "Maybe we're seeing something new. Partly, we don't know what the effect of high alcohol consumption on the heart might be. And partly, of course," he had grinned slyly, "there's a certain amount of what we politely call inbreeding in the area. And that is a result of the high alcohol consumption!" His audience had smiled with him.

In October, David had performed fifty-two echocardiograms—mostly repeats, for people on six-monthly check-ups. And twenty-two arteriograms, four up from September. Three gamma scans, but the machine was new.

Twenty-nine thousand dollars for October, on those procedures alone. Good thing welfare and Blue Cross were so good about paying. Late, sometimes, but without fuss.

And the gross pay was very nearly the same as his take-home pay. David let the hospital book his appointments, and of course he performed all the procedures himself. Not like in his training, or in San Diego, where he'd had dozens of paramedics and assistants harrassing him.

She worked steadily for twenty minutes before realizing that she wasn't merely chilly, she was shaking with cold. She checked the thermostat. It read 55°, even though it was set for 72°.

The radiators were icy to the touch. Something must have gone wrong with the pipes from the solar heater again. They were still, as David said, working the bugs out.

She tried the hospital. Dr. Berman, she was told, was in the angio lab and would be for the next several hours. Next she called the solar heating people in Far River, thirty miles away. They wouldn't be able to stop by until tomorrow.

"Tomorrow!" she slammed down the phone.

Shivering, Lisabeth made herself another steaming cup of coffee. At least the water heater and the stove were electric. And the sauna, of course.

That was the solution. She'd take a twenty-minute sauna and then maybe she'd be warm enough to dress quickly and drive into town. She'd stop at Ellen's shop, after all.

Even the sauna wasn't theirs, she reflected bitterly; it was his. She removed her clothing but left the jewelry on, comparing herself to the centerfold David had jocularly pinned on the wall: a big blonde with more spheres than a crate of grapefruit. David liked asses. The girl was looking over her shoulder in the kneeling pose Lisabeth hated. He got tired of tits, she supposed, after pounding on so many chests.

Not even anything to read. Unless you counted the big stack of warped porno magazines and a smaller pile of medical journals.

She flipped through a few of the former as the electric hum of the heater filled the room. Finally, she was beginning to thaw out.

These magazines were just filth. Why hadn't she thought to bring in yesterday's issue of *W*? Or her novel? But a sauna wasn't any place to read about psychopathic mass murderers.

She pulled out a medical journal at random. Once in a while there was something vaguely interesting: a report on a new diet or exercise regimen. She scanned the articles, then the letters to the editor pages. You were most likely to find something amusing in the letters. Doctors liked to report their bizarre athletic injuries—skier's balls, for instance, or jogger's penis. Bragging, in the guise of science.

The letter jumped out at her. She read it through quickly, then again, more slowly. It made reference to previous issues. She searched through the stack of journals: one was there. She turned to the article in question and read it as carefully as she could. Oh my God. More references. This time, the right journals weren't in the stack.

Trembling, she pulled David's terrycloth robe over her. In his library she was able to find three of the journals the article referred to, and from their bibliographies, eight more.

She took the phone receiver off the hook and returned to the sauna, carrying the journals and two six-packs of mineral water.

For the next five hours she lay naked on the cushioned bench, sipping and reading, turning the heat off when she started to sweat and back on again when the room cooled off.

It all made such perfect sense. It explained everything. And it suggested to Lisabeth a solution. A perfect solution.

Her husband found her there at six o'clock when he strode into the sauna without knocking.

"Beds unmade, room a mess, no food, and it's freezing!" He flung his briefcase on the floor and switched on the heater. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

Lisabeth stared at him calmly. "I've been reading."

"Dandy! You've been reading! What, *War and Peace*?"

"No. Your medical journals."

"Oh, fine. Thinking of going to medical school? A bit late in the day for that, don't you think? You're over the hill, baby." He leaned over her. "What's the matter with the heat? And what's the matter, may I ask, with you?"

"The pipes again is what's the matter with the heat. And what's the matter with me is that I want a divorce. Right away. Like yesterday."

"A divorce!" He sat down heavily on the bench. "Well. I can't say I'm swept off my feet with astonishment." He had a way of drawing out his words when angry that, in the past, had frightened Lisabeth somewhat. She wasn't frightened now.

"I suppose not. I haven't been awfully happy, you know. And it's not as if we had kids."

"We certainly don't. Well, I have to tell you, Lis, it doesn't exactly break my heart."

"I didn't think it would."

"It isn't going to break my wallet, either, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, we've been married seven years. No kids. You're the one asking for divorce. I've never abused you or deserted you and you'd have one hell of a time proving infidelity, believe me. Besides, you have a proved ability to earn your own living."

"Some living! Six years as a secretary and ten months as your billing clerk!"

"So what do you expect? Listen, we don't want to spend a mint on attorney's fees. I could give you—oh, \$15,000 a year. That's more than generous."

"Multiply it by ten."

"Are you crazy?" he laughed harshly.

"I've been reading all afternoon. I holed up here, even took the phone off the hook, I haven't had lunch—"

"You mean you didn't get those accounts done? Goddamn it, Lisabeth, as long as you're still my—"

"I've been reading these." She pointed a languid, ringed hand toward the medical journals. "I know what's going on."

"What the hell do you mean!"

"All those 'echo diagnoses' you make—the ones where people don't have any symptoms? But they have to come back every three months for another echo—at \$300 a throw."

"So what? This area has a high incidence of—"

"Bull! just bull! You never took your own echoes before, not even in training very much. You were too brilliant, remember? But now you are, and maybe you get echoes that look like those diagnoses. But it says here—and here—and here—and in all these, that that's a very easy mistake to make! By an inexperienced or incompetent technician!"

"And that's just what you are, David. You're a board-certified cardiologist, but you're an inexperienced," she paused, "*incompetent* technician."

"Well, aren't we a little smartass!" His voice was high and furious. "Listen, Miss—"

"You might not even have realized it at first." She drew a deep breath. "But I bet you have for a long time now. That's why Sam was so surprised at how many cases you find. There aren't any cases!"

He stared at her for a long moment. "Go on."

"David, I will spill the beans if you don't give me an uncontested divorce and \$150,000 a year. I will start with Sam and then the county medical society and the AMA and I won't stop until you're—disbarred, or whatever they call it." She ended more weakly than she had planned.

"If you do that, you'll be a mighty poor divorcee."

"I don't care; it might even be worth it." Her eyes drifted from his and encountered the derriere of the blonde on the door. Besides, she thought, there's always Sam.

"All right, we'll talk about it. I'm going to make some martinis."

"And bring me a couple of aspirins." Good. He was going to be civilized after all. Lisabeth settled back against the cushions, twisting her rings. Funny, she'd felt powerful, being naked with all this gorgeous jewelry on. He looked so prim in his suit. She felt like royalty. And she'd won.

Nest! She'd feather her own nest, all right. And what a nest it would be!

The first thing Sam discerned in the rosy light was the digital clock reading seven thirty P.M. He didn't want to look at anything else. The tall village cop next to him gasped; reluctantly, Sam brought his eyes down to the cushioned redwood bench. She was beautiful. Naked, her slender body bathed in the rosy light, the jewels gleaming at earlobes, neck, fingers, it was hard to believe she was dead.

A few pornographic magazines were on her lap—an immodest fig leaf. On the floor, next to the bench, stood a pitcher half full of clear fluid; next to it was a martini glass, olive surrounded by a tiny puddle.

"Jesus Christ." Sam leaned against the door. He had to be careful. His role here was medical examiner and shocked, sympathetic friend, nothing more. He fumbled for his medical kit.

"You find her like this, Dr. Berman?" the cop asked in a rough whisper. David was pacing up and down the cold hall.

"I got home about six. Let's see. It was dark and cold and I thought she'd gone out, maybe with Ellen. I turned up the thermostat. Didn't notice it was broken. That damn solar heating, must have busted during the night. I remember it was cold when I got out of bed this morning."

"She probably came in here to keep warm," the cop said.

"Then I wasted more time making myself a drink or two. Looked at the mail. Hunted up a few slides I wanted. Jesus, I must have fooled around for nearly an hour. It didn't get any warmer so I decided to—to get into the sauna. Until she came home.

"I saw her, just like that. No pulse. Her pupils were fixed, dilated, she was all stiff—oh my God." He covered his face with his hands.

Sam tried to keep his hands from trembling as he inserted the rectal thermometer. It was electronic, with a range from 85° to 109°. The digits spun to 108.7° and stayed there. Sam looked at the wall thermometer: the sauna was 110°.

"She's been dead for hours," he told the two men. "Probably since late morning; we'll check the stomach contents to confirm that. Can't tell a thing by rigor mortis in this heat; it sets in right away. But for her body temperature to be this high—" He shook his head and tried to keep the anger from his voice. "Doesn't this thing have an automatic timer?"

"I dismantled it," David Berman replied dully. "I've built up a good

tolerance to heat. Couldn't stand to keep resetting the thing. She didn't come in here very often."

"Yeah. Well, you'd put around eleven A.M. for the time of death, doc?"

"Approximately." Sam Schwarz hated being called doc.

"I must have been right in the middle of that angio." David covered his face again. "You know, I almost phoned her, right before we started. Lisabeth—well, I guess it happens to physicians' wives—my fault, I've been so busy—" He cleared his throat. "She'd started drinking a little during the day."

"Yeah." The cop glanced at the martini pitcher. Sam would have liked to punch his smooth young jaw.

Instead, he accompanied the body to the morgue. Might as well get the autopsy over with tonight; he wouldn't get any sleep anyhow.

Reverently, he removed the bangles—the necklaces, rings, bracelets—and gave them to his assistant, Tibbets, to wrap. David would want them back. Still, he wouldn't miss . . .

Sam quietly pocketed the jade ring. After all, he'd given it to her. David was in no shape to notice.

The funeral was decorous. Ellen and the other wives wept quietly, and exchanged glances.

David Berman threw himself even more into his work. Sam often urged him to publish his remarkable data, but there didn't seem to be enough hours in the day to get it into shape.

Christmas came and went. Changing clothes for a game of squash one late afternoon, Sam was surprised to find Lisabeth's ring in his pocket. He'd almost forgotten her. What the hell, he thought sentimentally, and put it on his little finger—it just fit—for good luck.

He noticed it again, painfully, an hour and a half later, in the club sauna.

"Ouch! What the hell—" He eased the ring off. "Look at this damn thing—I've got a second degree burn, and I've only been in here twenty minutes or so. It'll make it hell to scrub."

He lay back on the bench, having placed the little ring on the ledge below. Now that was funny.

"Not a mark on her body." He'd said it himself. He could see it clearly: smooth, dead skin.

And the martini. Five, six hours in that heat—wouldn't the alcohol

have evaporated?

But her body temperature had been sky-high. It had to have happened that way: her body heat equilibrating, over the hours, with the heat of the sauna. The only time he'd seen that kind of temperature was with heat stroke. Or atropine overdose, of course. Atropine. Cardiologists prescribe it orally for speeding up a dangerously slow heart beat. . . .

The body had been cremated. Over two months ago, now.

He'd liked Lisabeth. She was attractive, feminine. But then, the last thing he needed was to get into some kind of messy thing with David Berman. All he had, after all, were a few suspicions.

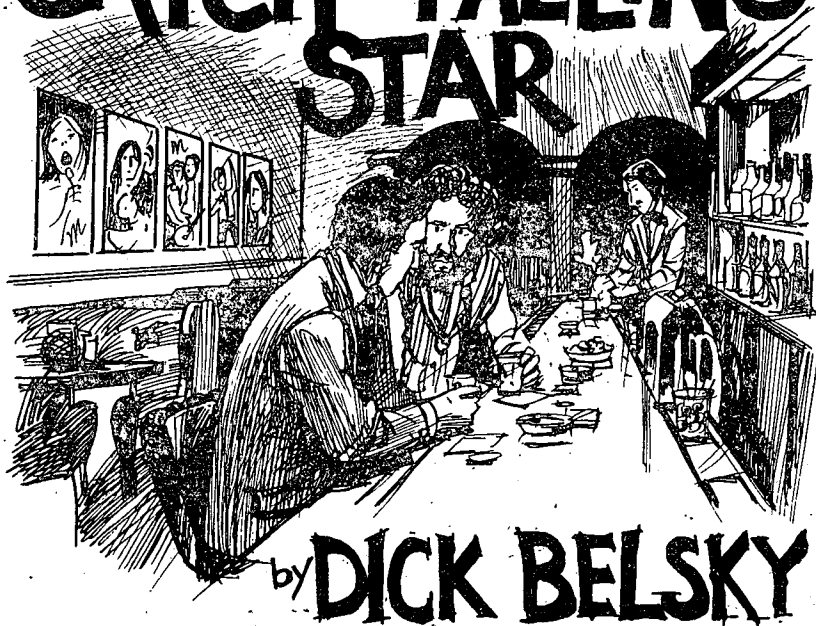
Whatever personal problems he'd had with his wife—and Sam didn't hold himself entirely blameless on that score—Berman was too good a man to be wasted by a guess, a rumor. For one thing, it was clear that the community needed him.

Whatever else he was, he was a hell of a cardiologist.



It was a fleeting glimpse—of a man who had died twelve years ago. And the client wanted him found.

CATCH A FALLING STAR



by **DICK BELSKY**

The guy found me at my office, which is in a not so swell neighborhood of New York City and up four flights of stairs: I saw him when he pushed his head inside the door. Balding, fiftyish, looked like he weighed nearly three hundred pounds. He was breathing heavily.

"Are you Manning?" he wheezed.

I nodded.

"Whew," he said, wiping his brow. "You're a tough man to find. My

name's Sterling. Albert Sterling. I'm a producer with Selectra Records. Maybe you've heard of us?"

"Yeah. I did some work for someone at Selectra a few years back."

"Good. Anyway, I have this problem. Someone told me to look you up, that you were real good. They said you work without asking too many questions, too." He gave me a big wink.

"Just what is it you want me to do, Mr. Sterling?"

"Did you ever hear of a rock star named Keith Lincoln?"

I said I'd heard of Keith Lincoln.

"I want you to find him for me."

I exhaled deeply.

"That might be a little hard," I told him. "He's been dead for twelve years."

Sterling chuckled. "Maybe he is; maybe he isn't. Keith Lincoln is supposed to have died twelve years ago, all right. But there's always been a lot of mystery surrounding his death. No one ever saw the body buried. Some people figure he might have just dropped out of sight."

"I've heard those stories," I said. "So what?"

"A couple of weeks ago I'm in San Francisco, walking through the lobby of the Golden Gate hotel, when I see him—big as life. He's a little older looking, and he's got a big black beard, but it was Keith Lincoln all right."

"It was probably just someone who looked like him," I said.

"Manning, I knew Keith Lincoln. I did some sessions with him back in the sixties. It was him, believe me."

I shrugged. "Okay, so what did he say?"

"Nothing, that's the problem. He got caught up in the crowd and was out the door before I could get to him. I looked all over, talked to people at the hotel—but nothing. Suddenly after twelve years he was there—then he was gone again. That's why I want you to go out there."

"And do what?" I asked.

"Pick up his trail at the hotel and try to track him down. You're a professional, you know how to do that. I don't. Then try to convince him to contact me and come out of hiding. A comeback record by Keith Lincoln would be a sure million-seller. I'll pay you five hundred a day for your work plus a \$10,000 fee if you find him."

I leaned back in my chair and thought about it. I wanted to tell Sterling to find someone else. I didn't like the job, and I didn't like him. But I needed the money. I always needed the money.

"Okay," I said finally. "I'll leave tonight."

I took a late plane out of Kennedy, carrying along a thick folder of background material Sterling had given me to read on the flight. The collection of newspaper clippings and record company bios told all about how Keith Lincoln had been a huge star in the sixties—a larger than life rock figure who ranked right up there with Dylan, Jagger, and Lennon. There were gold records, million dollar concert tours, and adoring fans everywhere.

But there was also a lot of drinking, drugs, and brushes with the law. It all began to take its toll, and by the end of the sixties Lincoln's career was slipping. He was still a star, but a falling one. Then came a bust in Milwaukee for heroin-possession that carried a possible ten year sentence. Lincoln fled across the border to Mexico—where he told friends he just wanted to sit in the sun, write poetry, and get away for a while.

In early 1970, the rock world was stunned to hear the news that he'd been found dead in bed. The official cause of death was listed by the Mexican authorities as a heart attack, although there were persistent rumors about a drug overdose. Few details ever came out, and pretty soon a legend began making the rounds that Keith Lincoln wasn't really dead. There were all sorts of stories: he was a vegetable in a hospital; he was writing a whole batch of new songs in the California desert; he was in a Mexican jail. No question about it, though, the clippings showed that a lot of people still thought he was alive.

By the time I'd finished reading everything in the folder, we were landing in San Francisco. I took a cab to the Golden Gate hotel and checked in.

The next morning I took a picture of Keith Lincoln to a nearby artist, had him draw a beard on it, and then made copies of the results. I spent the rest of the day showing them around to everyone at the hotel—clerks, maids, bellhops. No one recognized him. Whatever Sterling's man was doing at the Golden Gate, he apparently hadn't been a guest.

There was a bar in the hotel lobby so I went in, ordered a scotch and soda, and tried to figure out my next move. I was halfway through my drink when I saw it. There on the wall behind the bar were pictures of a lot of sixties rock stars. Hendrix, Joplin, the Jefferson Airplane. And a smiling Keith Lincoln. It seemed too bizarre to be just a coincidence.

I called the bartender over. He was a young guy in his twenties with

long blond hair and a Robert Redford-type mustache.

"What's with all the pictures?" I asked.

"Oh, them. They've been here for years. I never even look at them. Back in the sixties, a lot of the big groups used to stay here and hang out in the bar. You know, during the whole Haight-Ashbury summer of love thing."

"That was before your time, I guess."

"Are you kidding. I've only been here three months. I'm really an actor. I'm just trying to get some money together to make it to Hollywood."

I took out one of my pictures and handed it to him.

"Did you ever see this guy?"

He looked at it for a minute.

"Yeah. He comes in here sometimes."

"I'm trying to find him," I said. "I'm an old friend and I heard he may have stopped here."

The kid shook his head. "You're no old friend," he said.

I smiled. "Okay, I'm a cop. Do you believe that?"

The kid chuckled. "You ain't no cop, either. You don't look the type."

"Let me put it this way," I said. "Here's a hundred dollar bill and my room number. If you call me the next time he shows up, there's another two hundred in it for you. That ought to help you get to Hollywood."

The kid thought for a second, then stuffed the bill in his pocket.

"One more thing," I said before I left. "Did you ever hear of Keith Lincoln?"

"Sure, he was a big singer in the sixties, right?"

"Would you know what he looked like if you saw him?"

"Nah, I don't remember nobody that came before Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers."

Nothing happened for four days. I hung around the city, rode the trolley cars, and took in the sights. Then on the fifth day the phone in my room rang.

"You feeling thirsty, friend?" the bartender asked. "You might want to come to the bar and have a drink."

When I got there I saw him sitting at the bar alone. A big guy with black, curly hair and piercing brown eyes—he looked like Keith Lincoln all right. I quietly slipped the bartender his money, then plopped down on the seat next to the guy.

"Hi, Keith," I said.

His head jerked up in surprise. For a second he looked confused, then smiled.

"Sorry, you must have me mixed up with someone else."

I smiled back. "No, I don't. You're Keith Lincoln. You know it, and I know it."

He looked at me cautiously. "You law?" he asked.

"Nope," I told him. "My name's Manning. I work for your old record company. They know you're alive, Keith, and they want you back."

We sat and drank and talked about the past twelve years. The death had been faked, Lincoln said, by bribing some Mexican authorities. Then he bummed around Mexico for a while, camped out for nearly a year in a log cabin in Oregon, and finally wound up in Northern California. Said he owned some land north of the city, raised some horses, and did some farming.

"It's a good living," he said, "and I like working outdoors. Most of the time I forget I'm Keith Lincoln myself. Except when I'm in the city. Then it all comes back to me, and I wind up coming over here for a drink or two. Memories. I guess. We had some great times here back then."

"Why the fake death anyway?" I asked.

"Well, there was the drug bust, of course. At first that was the reason. But, heck, that drug law was ruled unconstitutional six months after my arrest, so I would have been free and clear. Mostly, I guess, I was just tired of being a rock star. I had more money than I'd ever need, and I was bored. So I decided to get out . . . I just wanted to do it very dramatically."

"Do you miss it?"

Lincoln shook his head. "Not really. Do you know I've still got my guitar back at the house, it's hanging on a wall. I don't think I've taken it down and played it in at least five years." He laughed. "I probably don't even remember how."

I cleared my throat. "You have to come back now, Keith," I said.

"No way."

"Look, I know you're alive. I have to tell Sterling because I'm working for him. That means the newspapers will probably find out. You can't do anything about that. Now, no one can force you to make records again. But do me a favor: think about it for a while. Call Sterling and talk it over

with him. You can make yourself a lot of money out of this if you want. It's up to you."

I stood up to leave. "Okay, I'll think about it," he said. "Hey, Manning, did you ever see me play?"

I smiled. "Just once, a long time ago, back in 1965, at a little place called the Gotham Club in New York City. That was before you hit it big. You probably don't even remember. I think you signed your first big recording contract about six months later and then it was instant stardom."

"Yeah, I remember the Gotham Club," he said. "You know, sometimes I think it was best then—just playing in a little club before a few people and barely making enough money to live on. It was more fun trying to get to the top than it was when I got there."

"It always seems to be that way." I stuck out my hand. "Good luck, Keith." He shook it and smiled. I smiled back. But I remember thinking how hard the skin on his fingertips felt.

Sterling was sitting in my office telling me how Lincoln had called him and agreed to go ahead with a comeback.

"We're going to make the announcement to the press tomorrow that Keith's alive. It'll put us on every front page in the country."

"Now there is the matter of my fee," I said.

"Of course, I didn't forget." He pushed two big packages of money over to me. I opened them, counted the contents, and then put them down in front of me.

"I can probably have a Keith Lincoln album in the stores within two months," Sterling was saying. "Then there'll be a thirty-city tour and . . ."

I held up my hand to stop him. "You don't have to convince me," I said. "There's no question that a live Keith Lincoln is worth millions."

Sterling grinned broadly.

"It's too bad you don't have one," I said.

Sterling's grin faded and he stared at me. "What are you talking about?"

"The guy's a fake," I said.

"Sterling was sweating now. "How do you figure that?"

"Three reasons," I said. "One, a guy in hiding would never spend so much time around an old rock hangout like the Golden Gate bar, where he was sure to be recognized sooner or later. Two, he said he hadn't played a guitar in five years, but his fingertips were covered with the kind

of calluses you get from constant practice—no doubt so his playing could pass for Lincoln's. Three, he talked about his early days at a place called the Gotham Club in New York City but there is no Gotham Club. I made it up."

Sterling licked his lips. "None of that is real proof. The calluses could be from farm work and . . ."

"Look, suit yourself," I told him. "Go ahead and hold your press conference. Then I'll get my information to the papers, too. Once they do a little digging, we'll see how well your Keith Lincoln holds up."

"The way I figure it," I said, "is that you dreamed up the whole scheme when you happened to run into a guy who was a dead ringer for Keith Lincoln. You knew a live Keith Lincoln could be a gold mine, so why not a Keith Lincoln look alike?"

"The only trouble was you had to make it look good. So you hired me to track him down for you—following a trail of clues you'd carefully left me. I figure even the kid behind the bar was working for you."

Sterling glared at me. "Give me my money back," he said.

"Nope, I carried out my part of the deal. It looks like you're just out \$10,000."

He started to reach under his coat, but I beat him to it. My gun was pointing at him before his hand ever got to his.

"Good day, Mr. Sterling," I smiled. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

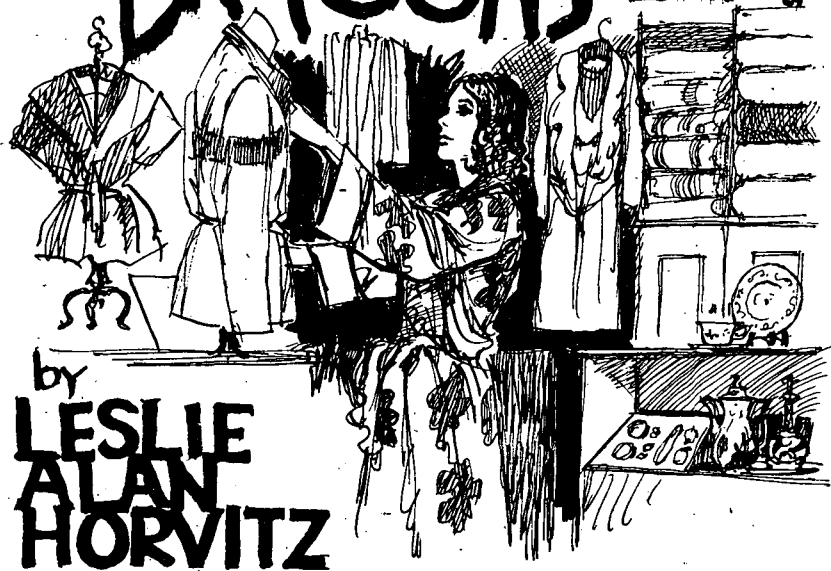
"Damn you," he growled angrily. Then he took his three hundred pounds and stomped out the door, slamming it behind him. I heard his footsteps thundering down the stairs.

After he'd gone, I lit up a cigar and thought back to a job I'd done twelve years ago. It was true, of course, that the double in San Francisco had given himself away to me with a couple of slipups. But then I knew he was a phony before I even went out there. I'd told Sterling during our first meeting how I'd once worked for someone else at Selectra. That was in 1970, and the assignment was top secret: cover up the truth about a big star's death and dispose of the body quietly. The star had died under what the guy who hired me called "extremely questionable circumstances." I didn't know any more than that and I didn't want to. The star's name was Keith Lincoln.

I took Sterling's \$10,000 over to my wall safe, locked it up, and then sat back down to wait for my next customer.

Pat Zacharias was one of those gifted, magical people. She ran a shop full of exotic things, entertained lavishly, and loved her husband. Until the strange and exotic drew too near one day.

THE DRAGON'S LADY



by
**LESLIE
ALAN
HORVITZ**

When I knew Pat and Mitchell Zacharias, Pat was running a shop located not far from the university. It was difficult to say what kind of shop it was because it seemed to sell a little of everything: antiques, Alpaca sweaters from Peru, water pipes, bright silk prints, flamboyant dresses that came in a variety of colors and designs, sets of silverware and China trade dishes. . . . The shop was called The Dragon's Lady, and to reach it you had to climb a set of stairs leading to the entrance on the second floor.

THE DRAGON'S LADY

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It was an obscure location, but everybody knew where it was, and it was always regarded as the kind of place where you could hang out if you were so inclined and engage the pretty girl at the cash register in conversation. Pat wasn't always there, of course, but when she was there you knew it; she had a certain aura and you sensed it as soon as you entered the shop. Pat had once been a jazz dancer and even when she was at rest you had the feeling of motion restrained with difficulty. Any moment it might burst out and bowl you over.

She hummed when she worked, she sang songs of her own devising to music of the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel, she was everywhere at once, moving from room to room, leaving behind her laughter and her scent, which was part musk, part the natural odors and potions of her own skin.

She was approaching her fortieth birthday when I first knew her, but she could, if she wanted to, look half her age. Her body was lean and harmonious; though there was something about her personality that was evanescent and impossible to pin down, her body had an undeniable solidity to it. She told me that she weighed only a hundred and ten pounds, but that didn't seem right; I suppose she just never allowed extra pounds to accumulate. She said she wanted to pare herself down to the bare minimum, let nothing get in her way, and when she travelled, she said, a single bag was all she needed, nothing more.

Her hair was black and mutinous, defying her best efforts to contain it; sometimes, despairing, she'd hide it all under a kerchief so that she resembled a slightly forlorn Russian peasant woman. But it is her face that I remember best; it was a face, like some art and some music, to which you would keep returning, again and again, either to find something new there you'd failed to notice before or else because you had no other choice.

Mitch she introduced me to only after I'd known her for a couple of months, but even then it was only a casual acquaintance, the result of stopping in at her shop three or four times a week. She told me that I would make an interesting addition to a dinner party, and promptly put her words to the test by inviting me to a forthcoming one that Saturday night.

I had the feeling that there was a female friend of hers she had decided I'd get along just fine with. She sat me next to this woman and took great pains to make sure that she knew what I did for a living.

"A writer? That must be fascinating. People must tell you lots of stories."

I have forgotten all about the woman, what she looked like, what she did. My attention was directed entirely towards Pat. And, almost as much, towards Mitch. I was curious to find out what sort of man her husband was. Having expected a stolid type, sensible and ultra-conservative, I was surprised to discover a man bursting with good spirits and laughter. He was bearded and somewhat portly, almost exactly his wife's height, and he gave the impression of a genial intellectual who spends his time in pursuit of an obscure thesis deep within the bowels of a library. But quite the contrary, he was a lawyer who specialized in real estate closings and mergers of the kind that Wall Street brokers respond enthusiastically to.

According to his wife, he did little reading aside from what his practice compelled him to do, and as he seldom looked at fiction it was unlikely that he would ever have heard of me even if I weren't as obscure a writer as I admittedly was. No matter, he delighted in having people of diverse interests and talents sitting at his dinner table. He generally eschewed the company of lawyers when he had a choice, he said.

"I rely on Pat to make sure I'm exposed to something else in this world besides contract law."

When he told me that I knew, though I have no precise idea how, that *The Dragon's Lady* was not making money (it probably was doing just the opposite) and that Mitch was subsidizing it to keep his wife happy.

There were maybe a dozen people assembled for this dinner party, including the host and hostess, and it soon became apparent that of that number only half had been to the Zacharias home before. The others, like myself, were acquaintances of Pat and seemed a bit astonished to find themselves at her table, working their way through a Caesar salad and a hotly spiced chicken dish. That was one thing you could count on about Pat, her love of hot spices.

It was a big house, perhaps a hundred years old, and set far enough from the main road so that you rarely heard a car pass. In the late spring and summer, I was given to understand, when the surrounding trees were thick with foliage, you couldn't so much as see a single slat of their neighbor's house. There was a tiny brook, Pat said, that ran on their land, and ordinarily you could listen to the water bubbling by, but it had been a hard summer, what with the drought, and anyway, with the premature onset of cold this autumn, the little water there was had frozen. So we listened to conversation and to what sounded dimly like Spanish guitar

music from another room.

It was a big house for two people. I wondered why they had never had children.

The next day I stopped in to thank Pat at her shop, telling her that I had had a lovely time and had enjoyed meeting her friends, but most especially I'd enjoyed the opportunity to meet her husband.

"And what did you think of—?" Here she mentioned the name of the woman she'd sat me next to.

I shrugged. "To tell you the truth, I didn't form an opinion."

She didn't believe me. "You have an opinion about everyone," she said. "Well, it just means I'll have to try again."

"Why are you so anxious to fix me up with somebody?"

"I don't like to see anyone alone. It isn't right."

"You want everybody to be as happy as you and Mitch?"

She looked at me strangely, but she never answered the question.

2

At first I convinced myself that the only reason I frequented The Dragon's Lady as much as I did was that I needed a break from work (or sometimes an excuse not to start it) and that Pat's shop was the best place to take that break; there was always bound to be someone there to pass the time with. I'd find myself sometimes in front of her shop without realizing that I had made it my destination when I set out from my apartment. I'd walk in, and no matter what hour of the day it was, Pat would be inside, occasionally by herself tending the register. It wasn't psychic exactly, but there was a connection there all the same.

Then one day I went by the shop and discovered it closed. "On Vacation," the sign Scotch-taped to the door read. "Be back by New Year's." Another sign, printed in big red letters, advised that the premises were protected by a burglar alarm system, just in case someone should get any ideas.

I was disappointed and a little hurt, I think, because she hadn't let me know about this vacation. But then why should she have? I was only a casual acquaintance; she would have no reason to keep me abreast of her every movement. And I knew from what she'd told me that she and Mitch travelled often, occasionally just picking up on whim and going off, though I admit that was somewhat at odds with the lawyerly image of him that I continued to hold in my head.

New Year's Eve came and went. I have a vague recollection of a party that noisily occupied two floors of a large and drafty house on the corner of Pitman and Governor, and of a woman who mistook my long silences for charm and kept playing up to me all night, fortified by too much kaluha and coffee.

The hangover I awakened with served as a rebuke for the too much of whatever I had had. It was a monumental hangover, the kind that locks you up and then throws away the key. It was a cold somber day, the first of the year, not particularly auspicious.

The Dragon's Lady wasn't far from where I lived; the walk, I reasoned, should do me good. But it only seemed to intensify the pounding in my head. When I reached the shop I passed by quickly, barely gazing up at the windows with the antique velvet dresses displayed in them. No lights there, no sign of any activity whatsoever.

I had gotten barely a block beyond the place when I heard the blast of a horn. I turned, unsure whether the horn was meant for me.

I saw a white Porsche, then I saw Pat.

She put the car in neutral and threw open the door. Her down jacket was unzipped, two gray mittens dangled by strings from the ends of her sleeves. Her face was flushed from the cold, but more than that it was deeply tanned.

So, I thought, she has come back from someplace warm.

"Hello, there!" she called.

I stepped over to her. I managed to affect a casual tone, as neutral as her transmission. "You and Mitch have a nice vacation? I saw the sign in the shop."

"Oh, it was fine. But Mitch wasn't with me. I went alone. It wasn't actually a vacation, you see. More business. I was down buying in Peru. Sweaters mostly. See?"

She opened up her jacket farther, revealing a thick white alpaca sweater.

Although I said it was obviously a fine sweater, that was not what I was interested in. "Mitch mind you going off alone?"

"He minds," she said, "but he's used to it. He's gone with me on my buying trips, but he gets bored. And there are places I go to he thinks are too primitive. Stick him in an air-conditioned hotel room with a view and a drink and he's happy."

I doubted this, but let it go. "I was just checking up on the store, you

want to come upstairs with me for a minute?"

With the heat shut off back in mid-December, the shop was predictably cold. We could see our breath when we spoke.

"How'd you spend your New Year's?" I asked her.

"With friends," she answered vaguely. It sounded like an event that had already dissolved from her memory. "My hands are cold. Feel them."

I did. They were cold all right. I held on for too long but she made no attempt to withdraw them. Then she turned her face away as though something outside the frosted window had just captured her attention.

"Tell you what, just let me make one phone call and I'll buy you a drink at Lizbeth's." She looked back at me. "For New Year's. You look like you could use a drink. I can tell."

"Listen, Mitch," I heard her say into the phone, "I just got to the store and I have some things I have to get done here." There was a long pause.

"No, it can't wait and yes, I know we're having company over for eggnog. They can hold on till I get back. Love you."

"We can have the drink another time," I said. "It doesn't have to be right this minute. I don't want to interfere—"

She wouldn't let me go on. "Don't be silly," she said.

If it begins this way was what I thought, with this petty deceit, how does it end? The other thought that ran through my mind was this: Something must have happened to her those two weeks she was in Peru. But what?

The dinner parties continued, relentlessly; and now I seemed to be invited to them all. The other guests were constantly being rotated, but I stayed on like one of the light fixtures above the dining room table. I was even expected to take the same place at the table, kitty-corner from Mitch. Pat meantime occupied a seat at the far end, close to the kitchen, and I rarely could hear what she was saying. From time to time she would glance my way, but that was about as much as I could hope for.

Mitch appeared to enjoy my company though many of the dinners passed without my uttering a word that I considered the least bit interesting. It could be that Mitch thought this suitable behavior from a writer (I was his first writer, he said) and that I should be under no obligation to make small talk.

Yet with me he became positively animated, surprising me with rev-

relations about his life. He told me that five years before he met Pat he'd been desperately in love with another woman and had pursued her across oceans and continents, only to discover, on the island of Rhodes of all places, that she was no longer in love with him. "I was in such a bad way that I didn't even contemplate a serious involvement for years, until Pat came along. I put everything into my career."

"And did very well at it, I'd say."

He ignored my praise. He said, "But if I knew that she was doing anything behind my back with another man I would divorce her in an instant."

"Pat, you mean?" I said stupidly.

"Pat, of course, Pat."

She was at the moment placing a flambé dish on the table, arousing looks of admiration from those seated at the other end.

If he did divorce her, I thought, that would mean the end of The Dragon's Lady. She certainly wouldn't be able to make a go of it on her own. It might mean the end of a lot of things: this house, the woods, the money that provided her with the house and the woods—and that brook when it thawed enough to come alive again.

"But she wouldn't do anything like that," he said. He gave me an ambiguous smile. "You see, I know her too well."

3

In the gloom of my apartment all I could really see of her was the extension of her leg as it emerged from the thicket of sheets, all amber in the final light of day. Her face was submerged in shadow.

I had just finished telling her what Mitch had said at dinner the night before and I was waiting for her answer.

"Mitch doesn't know me," she said at last. And as if to admonish me as well, she added, "No one does."

"Do you think he suspects that there's anything between us?"

(I realize how hackneyed these words sounded, how they smacked of dialogue from movies you catch late at night on TV, but having seldom had the opportunity to apply them in real life, I didn't mind using them. Besides I couldn't think of any better way of putting it.)

Placing a finger at the bottom of her lips, she slowly shook her head. "He suspects nothing." There was no hint of doubt in her voice.

"It seems to me from what I've observed that he's a fairly perceptive

man. He wouldn't have gotten as far as he has if he weren't."

"That's called shrewdness, dear, not perception. And you have to understand, when people don't want to see what's right there in front of their eyes, and I don't care how damned smart or perceptive they are, they simply don't. And Mitch would rather not see, that's all."

When I didn't respond she went on, "But don't think I don't love him. Because I do."

I wish I could have shared her certainty. But I didn't. Maybe it was guilt, maybe paranoia, but I began to have the feeling that Mitch was onto us and that he was only waiting for an opportunity to make his move. Having to sit so close to him at those dinner parties and exchange opinions on the state of politics and the local art scene was sheer torture for me. I had only to look into Mitch's eyes to see the anger and the pain he was bottling up. How he could stand to have me near him was beyond me.

I told Pat to leave me out of her next party.

"What, are you crazy? So long as you keep coming there's no problem. It's when you stop that he will suspect something." She was adamant about this; it seemed vital for her that I continue to attend.

Even so I canceled out whenever a pretext was available. A winter flu was to be expected and so I called up Pat and claimed one for myself.

"You seemed fine to me this afternoon," she said.

"Is Mitch there?"

"Mitch, are you there?" I heard her call. "No, he's not here."

"I can't make it, Pat."

"The flu come over you suddenly?"

"That's right."

"Have it your way."

Another time I brought a woman with me. Just to see what kind of reaction I'd get.

It wasn't favorable. The following morning Pat phoned me. "What was the name of that girl you were with last night?"

"Miriam."

"Miriam." The name was like a curse coming from her. "Well, Mitch and I decided that she doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the group so I wish you wouldn't bring her with you next time."

I wanted to say that I myself wouldn't be coming in the future, but couldn't bring myself to do so. "Pat," I said.

"I'm at Mitch's office now. We have some papers to look over here so I can't talk. Take care of yourself."

By early March I had just about reached the point where I was determined to break off with her. I couldn't see that it made any sense carrying on; whatever it was we had wasn't going anywhere. But there was one problem and the problem was that I think I was in love with her. Which was not what I had had in mind and nothing I particularly welcomed. Moreover, I still had only the haziest notion of how she felt about me. She'd been right; she was impossible to know. Or impossible for me to know anyhow.

I was resolved to do something definitive, even if it should lead promptly to disaster. Just so long as it was definitive, that was all I cared about.

She was generally in the shop every day at this time; it was a season of buying and taking inventory and as such her presence was constantly required.

But on this particular Thursday afternoon I found only Amy, the nubile undergrad she'd hired to tend the cash register.

"Haven't you heard?" she asked me on seeing my face.

"Heard what?"

"Mitch's taken ill. Pat's at the hospital with him."

"How serious is it?"

Amy shrugged. "Pretty serious I think, but I don't know. Nobody tells me a thing around here."

4

"Oh, he'll be fine," Pat said to me the next day when I finally reached her at home. "It's some kind of viral thing, an intestinal flu or something. They're doing tests."

They did dozens of tests, but in the end his physicians were baffled. Neither the pathologists nor the radiologists could discover what was wrong with him. He seemed to recover and after a week they sent him home.

"I was sick as a dog," Mitch told me when I next saw him—not at one of his dinner parties, as it turned out, but downtown, a block or so from his office where we just sort of ran into each other. "Kept Pat up all night vomiting. And then there was the diarrhea." He grimaced in recollection of the agony. "One hell of a thing to have to go through. But, you know,

everybody gets these bugs. I'm okay now."

He didn't look okay though; he looked peaked and wan, and while he could have done with fewer pounds he'd lost so much weight that he seemed almost frail. And older, much older.

I wasn't seeing Pat so much at this juncture; her shop was demanding a great deal of her attention for one thing and there was the crisis with Mitch. I imagined that maybe she, too, was looking for an excuse to get out of the situation. I called it that, a situation.

But I kept making assumptions and I kept being wrong.

It was nearly two in the morning on the 22nd of March (the date sticks clearly in my mind) when she woke me with her phone call. She sounded to me as though she'd been drinking or else was on something that was supposed to make her sleep and wasn't. "I needed to talk to you."

"Why, what is it, Pat?"

"He's getting worse."

"Who, who is?"

It was hard understanding her.

"Mitch! Mitch is getting worse."

"What about the doctors?"

"It's that same thing again he had the last time, only worse. He won't listen to the doctors. They want to put him in the hospital but he refuses to go. He doesn't trust them. They gave him a sedative and put him out, but that's the best they can do unless he goes to the hospital."

"But surely there must be some way to persuade him to go. Have you spoken to his partners? They must have some influence over him."

"Believe me, I've spoken to everybody. Can't you come here?"

"When?"

"Now. I need you here with me. I'm going crazy. Please, you have to come."

"But it's two in the morning. . . . " As if that made any difference.

"I need to be with someone."

"But you have friends."

"No friends, no one, only you, please."

Her desperation was so palpable that I resigned myself to getting out of bed and going. Even after I assured her that I'd be there within the hour she didn't seem to want to hang up.

On my way over to her house, a distance of eight miles, I continued to tell myself that my principal obligation was to calm her down. I doubted

whether Mitch's condition was as grave as she'd made out; certainly their doctor, whoever he was, would have insisted on his hospitalization if that were the case. She was probably overwrought. More to the point, she possessed a theatrical nature. She didn't always mean to exaggerate, she just couldn't help herself.

It was also possible that it was the booze doing it or drugs; for all I knew she might have drifted back to sleep and would awaken with absolutely no memory of the call she'd made to me. I almost expected no one to answer when I rang the bell.

But she was waiting for me at the door, possibly alerted by the noise the gravel made beneath the tires of my car.

There was just a trickle of light coming from the hallway; otherwise the windows were dark, like the surrounding woods. It was cold and a wind blew through those woods. A dog was barking loudly somewhere in the distance.

Maybe Pat had sounded hysterical over the phone, but when she greeted me she seemed perfectly composed. She was wearing a blue nightgown of silk that crackled with static electricity with each movement she made. Her feet were bare; she liked walking the rugs of her home that way, the rugs were so deep and soft.

She said not a word, but she threw her arms about me and held me close, and all the while I kept waiting for Mitch to stir and come to the top of the stairs, look down, and find his wife embracing another man at a quarter to three in the morning.

The only light originated from the brass lantern-like fixture suspended from the hallway ceiling. Otherwise it was all darkness. In the living room the eighteenth century clock was ticking loudly. A chime signalled the quarter hour. It was like a shock, that chime, and I withdrew from her grasp.

"How is he?"

"Sleeping," she said. "Fast asleep. I think he's better."

I had no idea what had changed in the forty minutes it had taken me to get to her, but something had.

She began walking away from me into the living room. I started after her. "Would you like anything to drink? Some scotch? You like scotch, don't you?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll have the scotch."

"I thought so." I could barely discern her in the dark. If she went too far into the house I'd lose her altogether.

We sat for a few minutes, she in the big fat cushioned chair Mitch generally favored, me on the sofa. We were like distant cousins reunited after fifteen years with not an inkling of what to say to each other.

"Are you sure he's all right?"

"Yes, I just checked on him. I'm sure it's the same thing he had last time."

"But you said over the phone that it was worse."

"I might have been wrong. I don't know. I'm so awfully tired."

She hung her head down as though she were prepared for a guillotine to come clanking down and cut it off. I could see nothing of her face, only her black hair.

"Pat . . . Pat, are you all right?"

I went over to her, kneeling at her feet. Then she regarded me; her eyes were swollen from crying, and red. She extended her arms again but not to hold me this time, just to touch me; all she wanted to do, it seemed, was check and see whether I was there, whether anyone was there. She was oblivious to the way her robe had come undone.

The clock tolled out the hour of three. Again I was surprised by it; I kept forgetting it was there.

"I'm all right," she mumbled. "Really I am."

Which was when she got down from the chair, settling herself between my outstretched legs.

"Mitch," I reminded her.

"Mitch I keep telling you is sound asleep."

I missed a chime. I caught the chime registering half past three. The one for three fifteen was the one I never heard.

"It's late," I said irrelevantly. "I should be going."

Something like a smile came to her lips. "I told you the doctor knocked him out with a sedative. What are you worried about?"

"It's a wonder you didn't take me into your bedroom."

"Now there's an idea."

Her mood was so suddenly buoyant that it alarmed me. I wanted to get out.

"All right," she said. "I'll let you go. You've been good, there's no

reason you shouldn't be able to go. Just do me a favor? Stay here for a minute while I check on Mitch?"

Without waiting for an answer, she hastened upstairs. Against the carpeted steps her bare feet were soundless.

Idly I picked up the glass of warm, half-finished scotch and began drinking from it.

Then I heard her shriek out my name. "Come quick, come quick!"

I found her leaning over the bed, furiously shaking her husband. I couldn't understand what she was doing and my first reaction was to try to restrain her.

"No, no, no, don't," she said. "Don't you see, he won't wake up, he won't wake up."

For the first time I looked at Mitch. He lay supine on the bed, a stick figure pasty white, his head lolling back at an absurd angle on the pillow, which was damp with perspiration. His eyes were open but they didn't appear to be seeing anything, and his jaw had gone slack like someone waiting for a bonbon to be popped into his mouth. He really didn't look much like Mitch; he looked more like a poor imitation of Mitch.

I groped and found the chain to the bedside lamp. Pat put her hand up to shield her eyes. "You're blinding me!" she cried.

I thought to shut her up, then remembered that there was no one anywhere around who could hear even if they were up and about at this dim hour of the morning.

Taking Mitch's wrist I felt for a pulse. There was none. I leaned my head close to his naked chest, listening hard for the trace of a heart beat.

"Don't," she said. "It's no use. He's dead. He's dead, you see. He's dead."

He was that all right; she wasn't mistaken.

5

She insisted on my attending the funeral. I didn't think it a good idea, but I hadn't the heart to refuse. It was an appropriate day for a funeral, too, with sullen skies and a light wet snow descending at frequent intervals on frozen ground which had its fair share of snow already.

I recognized few of the people who turned out for the funeral; most of them, I suspected, were his family and friends, not hers. Many had the look I associated with high-priced lawyers, men used to picking out loopholes from a mile away. These were not the type who'd gotten reg-

ularly invited to the Zachariases' dinner parties. On the other hand, the dinner party set didn't rate a last farewell to its host.

Though I had it in mind to leave promptly after the services were over, I found myself trailing behind a caravan of limousines to the cemetery. It was located several miles away from the funeral home; just like the living, the dead were having more and more trouble obtaining space for themselves with all the competition.

It was a long and bumpy route to the gravesite as the procession threaded its way past rows of headstones, some of them so old that the epitaphs were all but eroded away.

Mitch's mother and father had gotten there before him; a square slab of marble demarcated their final resting place. A strip of canvas had been laid across the hole where Mitch was to be deposited. The rabbi, a smallish balding figure with steel-rimmed glasses, intoned the Kaddish while Pat and a trio of three men stood by his side, shakily reciting the ancient Aramaic words along with him. These three men seemed vaguely to resemble Mitch, like copies that hadn't turned out quite right. Must be his brothers, I thought, though one was too old and was more likely an uncle.

I happened to notice, before we left, that there was still another plot to be filled, immediately adjoining the one Mitch was presently to occupy. It was just a patch of dead grass, glazed by frost and partially covered over by snow.

Until this moment Pat had not spoken to me, nor so much as glanced at me; I had come late to the funeral and it was possible she didn't realize I was there at all. But now she brushed past me, the fur of her fox coat just touching the side of my arm. "You're coming back to the house, aren't you?" she said in a low voice and, before I could answer, strode swiftly to the waiting limousine.

It was then that a man appeared on her left. He was short of stature, with a dark complexion, and he seemed to have come out of nowhere. I didn't remember seeing him at the funeral certainly nor did he look like someone who would have been invited.

He was wearing a tan jacket, with a visored cap pulled over his brow, and in his hand he carried an unopened umbrella. He stopped several paces away from the limousines and fixed his gaze on Pat.

It was possible that he had been visiting another grave and just happened to stumble on this mourning party, but I doubted it. The manner

in which he stared at Pat suggested that he knew her from somewhere.

She stopped, too, and regarded him. I was close enough to overhear the woman next to her ask if she knew who he was.

"Never saw him before in my life," Pat answered. "Let's go."

I was the last person to drive out and when I looked back, he was still there, alone in the snow, staring impassively after us.

The alarm was still shrieking by the time I arrived at her house. The police were already there and whoever had broken the front window was apparently gone, and yet the alarm continued to blare, maybe because no one could figure out how to shut it off. I imagined that that had been Mitch's special preserve, the ins and outs of the alarm system.

It was a big break; the window dominated half the right wing of the house and half of it was gone, leaving behind a very jagged triangular hole and a thousand glimmering shards of glass strewn on the lawn.

Several people were congregated on the sidewalk, gawking stupidly at the ruptured window as though they expected more of it to disintegrate before long. Pat had disappeared from view; I assumed she was with the police officers surveying the house to see what, if anything, had been taken.

I heard a woman saying, "If the house weren't so isolated this wouldn't have happened. The problem is, it's too damn isolated."

It was an unfortunate thing to have happen at any time, but especially on the day you put your husband into the ground. I decided that I had had quite enough and went on my way without saying goodbye.

I've lost count of the number of times I ran through that night in my head, the night of Mitch's death. Often I have the feeling that he was dead when I arrived and that Pat already knew. Often I have the feeling that he cried out for help and that she didn't hear—we didn't hear—and that he died needlessly, and cruelly betrayed besides. Neither scenario was especially appealing. No matter how I looked at it, it seemed to me I was guilty.

But the guilt was all in the mind. So far as the courts were concerned, no one was guilty of Mitch Zacharias's death. The autopsy had disclosed nothing more insidious in his bloodstream than .07 percent of alcohol, meaning maybe a glass or two of wine before bed. The coroner could only state that death had resulted from "sudden respiratory failure" though he

was evidently unable to account for how this failure came about. Yet, with no evidence of foul play available, Mitch's body was stitched back together and consigned to a funeral home on Hope Street where it had then been made presentable.

6

"There've been a lot of strange men coming around here."

To entrust a secret to Amy was like putting it on the six o'clock news.

Except for Amy the shop was empty; there weren't many customers these days. The recession, everybody said. But with the inheritance Pat had come into she could probably keep The Dragon's Lady running indefinitely. So it was rumored. I didn't know this for a fact. It had been some while since I'd seen her, since the funeral actually. And I hadn't expected to find her in when I stopped by; I didn't really want to see her. (I did and I didn't.) But I was anxious to learn how she had fared in the last few weeks.

And who, I thought, would know better than Amy?

"Strange men, what kind of strange men?"

"Narcs."

"They're strange men all right. How do you know they're narcs?"

"And some weird Peruvian." She went right on, ignoring the question.

"Weird Peruvian?" Then I recalled the man with the umbrella who'd materialized in the cemetery. Could that be the one she was referring to?

"That's right. You ask me, it's got to be coke."

"Why?"

"You know, all those trips Pat makes down to Peru." A customer had just walked in and now Amy was leaning over the counter, her voice reduced to a whisper. "You're her friend, right? I can tell you."

"But those trips were to make purchases for the shop, I thought. Those alpaca sweaters."

Amy sighed with frustration. "Sure, sure, but don't you see, that's just a cover."

"So how did you know they were narcs, these men?"

"You can always tell." She must have thought me very dense. "There were two of them. They came in here a week or two ago and asked me some questions, like how long the store's been open and how long have I worked here, you know. Then they came back a few days later when

Pat was here and talked to her."

"What happened?"

"I don't know exactly. They talked in her office so I couldn't hear. And she wouldn't tell me. But after that I never saw them again so I thought everything was okay. Except for the Peruvian."

"This Peruvian . . ." I described the man I'd seen at the cemetery to her.

"That sounds like him," she said. "You know him?"

"I saw him once, that's all."

"He comes in here every other day, skulks around, you know. A real creep. Pat avoids him if she can. But when I ask her why doesn't she throw the guy out she doesn't answer me. You ask me, she's afraid of him."

"Any idea why?"

"Nope, but I bet it has to do with coke. I bet it all has to do with coke."

Pat used grass, I knew, and she had a proclivity for Quaaludes and a variety of prescribed drugs that put you to sleep or alter your mood, but I had never heard her express an interest in cocaine, let alone witnessed her use any. But that didn't mean anything. There was a lot about Pat that I didn't know.

Although there was no good reason to believe that she would contact me I still could not stay for any length of time in my apartment without thinking I'd get a call from her. There were those nights when I'd jerk up in bed, certain that I'd heard the phone ring, certain that she was on the other end, only to realize that it was a dream or else the phone ringing in the next apartment.

And many times I'd pick up the phone and dial her number, occasionally waiting until I heard her say hello before hanging up. Once I got hold of a woman whose voice I could not identify. When I finally made up my mind to speak to her (although I had no idea what I could possibly say), all I got was a recorded announcement informing me that the number had been changed and was now unlisted. It made sense, I thought, and I wondered why she hadn't changed it before.

I tried The Dragon's Lady, but was told that she was out of town, and in any case seldom came in any longer as she had now hired someone to manage the shop for her. Even my informant Amy was gone. It was mid-June, after all, and she was off somewhere for the summer. The young

women who'd assumed charge of the shop were comely enough, and personable, but the fact was that I was a stranger to them. There no longer seemed a point in going there.

I drove by her house a number of times, and once stopped, parking a short distance away and walking back through the woods. For the first time I heard the brook Pat had mentioned to me so often; it didn't sound like much. The foliage was thick, and until you got up close, the house was hidden from view. It was just as I remembered it. The window had been repaired in front, and all the broken glass long since removed from the lawn. It never looked as if anyone was at home (maybe it was true; maybe she was out of town), but I couldn't bring myself to ring the bell to see whether anyone came to the door.

I thought then that I had lost her for good. What I couldn't figure out was whether I should consider myself lucky or not.

It hadn't gotten too far into July when I received an invitation to a party for a newly married couple. I did not know the host but I was a friend of the groom, a carpenter-turned-claims-adjuster. The party was held on the south shore, a five minute walk to within sight of the bay; it was an afternoon affair and a tent had been set up in case it rained. But it did not rain. It was a perfect day for a party and wherever you looked there were pretty girls in skimpy dresses transporting plates full of hors d'oeuvres back to their boyfriends.

I somehow fell into conversation with a group of people whom, but for too many vodka tonics, I would ordinarily have avoided. A man mentioned Pat's name. I felt something come loose inside me.

"Oh yes," a woman said, "I've heard of her. She was the one who poisoned her husband, isn't that the one?"

"Well, that was never proved," another woman declared, though the tone in her voice suggested it was something that needed no proof.

Poisoned? I thought. Had I known all along and just not wanted to admit it to myself? In my semi-drunken state I really had no idea.

"What I heard was that she planned it with her lover. He was there with her the night Mike—"

"Mike?" the man put in. "Who's Mike? You mean Mitch."

"All right then, Mitch," the woman said, contemptuous of such fine distinctions. "Anyways there was a lover."

"There were several, I hear," a woman said flatly. Where had she come

from? She was wearing a short blue cocktail dress. It took me back to that night; it was the same color as Pat's nightgown. The same color as the waters in the bay five minutes' walk away.

Several lovers? Yes, that would be possible, but when had she time for them all? Listening to these people I was in immense pain, it was just that I was uncertain where the pain was coming from. All I knew was that I never wanted to be sober again.

"It wasn't that Brazilian she's always hanging around with, was it?" the woman in the blue cocktail dress asked.

"What Brazilian?" demanded the man, who seemed to be the authority in this discussion.

"I don't know. Isn't there some Hispanic she's with these days? I assume it's a lover. I saw him once across the street. He was walking with Pat. I waved and called to her but she didn't notice me. Either that or ignored me. I wouldn't be surprised if it was the latter."

The woman in the blue cocktail dress said the word Hispanic like someone who hasn't quite gotten used to referring to ethnic minorities by their proper names. I wanted to tell them all that he was Peruvian but I refrained from speaking.

"I hear she's putting the shop she owns up for sale," said the man. He looked like a man knowledgeable in matters of finance. "There's apparently a money problem."

"A money problem!" one of the women said derisively. "A money problem? She got so much from her husband that that's hard to believe."

"Well, you know, dear," said her friend, "people do go through money."

7

As an alumnus, I was allowed to dine in the faculty club, which was how I came to be there early in the evening of July 18th. There were few people about; most likely everybody was out of town, getting a jump on the weekend.

I was with a friend, a perennial graduate student, who always looked in need of a good meal. Halfway through that good meal he gazed towards the doorway and said, "Isn't that Pat Zacharias? You used to be friends, didn't you?"

He knew little about my relationship with her and nothing about that night. I turned around in my chair.

I scarcely recognized her; she had changed her appearance, most no-

ticeably by having her hair cut; it was also lighter than I remembered its being, but that might just have been because of the midsummer sun.

She was wearing a stylish dress of some gauzy material so thin that I almost doubted it had any substance at all. And she seemed to move differently; more resolutely than I remembered.

With her was a man who might have been twice her age; he was gray, by which I mean not only the thatch of hair sprouting from his scalp but his face as well, which looked as though it had last been exposed to the light of day decades before. He walked with dreadful slowness and when he sank into his chair it was with an audible groan.

My friend was talking to me about the problems he was having with his thesis advisor, but I couldn't concentrate. Despite the temptation to go over and say hello to her I remained where I was. I wasn't even certain she'd seen me.

Only when we'd done with our coffee did I approach her table.

She knew I was there, but she allowed several moments to pass before raising her eyes to meet mine. An expression of surprise came over her face. "How are you?" she said. "It's been ages."

Her companion regarded me without interest, but Pat proceeded with the introductions in any case. "This is a dear friend of mine, Professor Edward Holliday. He's in the biochemistry department."

Professor Edward Holliday nodded in acknowledgement but he said nothing.

Pat seemed ill at ease, but I couldn't tell whether I was responsible. "You must call me sometime," she said.

I pointed out that I didn't have her number.

"You don't?" She seemed genuinely surprised. "Here, then, I'll write it down for you."

I took the cocktail napkin she inscribed and tucked it into my pocket. "When's the best time to reach you?"

"Any time," she replied. "I don't get out much these days."

When I returned to my friend, he asked me who the man with her was. I told him. To my surprise, he knew the name.

"Him," he said, shaking his head.

"She says he's a professor in the biochem department."

"But did she tell you what he does? He's a specialist in toxins."

I looked at him.

"Poison toxins. The kind Indians put in their blowguns to put their

enemies out of commission with. He's something of a legend on campus. The stuff he deals with they say you just touch it with your pinky and zap!"

"Zap?"

"Zap," my friend repeated with great finality.

Sunday I called her. I did not expect her to be in. The city in summer was empty; I felt like its sole inhabitant. But she answered. Maybe she was telling the truth when she'd said she didn't get out much.

"Why aren't you at the beach?" I asked her straight out.

"I don't know, why don't you take me?"

So I did.

It was she who chose the beach, it was on a cove and we had it all to ourselves. A mile in one direction and the beach was full of nudists, a mile in the opposite direction and it was populated by fat women lounging under purple umbrellas and a million kids licking ice cream off their fingers.

For the forty minutes it took us to reach this particular beach we'd confined our conversation only to the most general topics. She didn't mention Mitch and I certainly wasn't going to. How do you ask a woman, even one who has been a lover, whether or not she poisoned her husband?

But she must have known what I was thinking. Once we'd gotten on the beach and unpacked the food she'd prepared, she came right out with it. "Are you like everybody else?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean do you think I killed Mitch?"

I said no. She gave me a long hard look, not knowing whether to believe me.

"You're just being kind. You don't have to be kind with me."

"You asked me a question, I answered you. That's my opinion. I don't think you're capable of killing someone."

She fell back, stretching out languorously while she studied the way the clouds were passing over the sun. "All right then," she said. "All right then. Because I didn't do it. I didn't poison anyone. But—"

"But what?"

"I can see where somebody could think I did. You see, I did obtain some toxic substances for my friend Professor Holliday. He asked me to see if I could get them for him when I was in Peru. And . . . " She

seemed to be measuring every word. "And I did. I didn't declare them, of course. I'm not sure of the law on these things, but I have a feeling you can't bring these substances into the country without going through a lot of red tape."

"Well, can't your Professor Holliday deal with the red tape himself rather than ask you to take the risk of bringing poisons in illegally?"

"Risk," she said disdainfully. "It was a favor, that's all. He asked me to try to get them. If I could, fine, if I couldn't, that would be okay too. It was a favor."

I didn't know much about medicine and modern diagnostic techniques, but I did know that there was such a thing as a toxicology screen and that there were poisons exotic and unfamiliar enough in the Americas which would never be detected. And you couldn't very well accuse a person of poisoning somebody if you couldn't determine whether he'd been poisoned in the first place.

A prolonged silence passed between us. I could tell that she thought I was lying, that I had made up my mind she was guilty. She rolled over on her stomach and undid the straps of her top so the sun would have the entirety of her back to work with. Closing her eyes, she pretended to be sleeping, putting an end for the time being to any further embarrassing exchanges.

It was only later, when we were ready to set back out on the road, that she said, almost offhandedly, that somebody was trying to kill her.

"Kill you?" I wanted to be sure I got this right.

"First they want to drive me out of my mind, and I think they've pretty much succeeded in doing that. Then they'll kill me, I'm sure of it. Wait, listen. You remember the day of the funeral, that break-in?"

I said I remembered.

"That was the start of it. Nothing was missing. It was meant to scare me, you see, to remind me how vulnerable I was."

"Isn't it possible that the burglars were scared away when the alarm went off?"

"If that were the end of it I'd say yes. But it wasn't. I began getting hate mail, death threats and worse."

"What could be worse?"

"You wouldn't understand, but never mind. There were phone calls, too, from men whose voices I couldn't identify. They said that they knew I'd killed Mitch and that I'd have to die for it, but not before suffering

the way he did. I'm positive that my house is watched. And very often I have the feeling I'm being followed"

"Have you notified the police?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "but what could they do? Half the detectives I've talked to are convinced I did kill Mitch and are frustrated as hell that they can't prove it."

"But that's not all. Last week, as I was getting into my car in front of Almacs—you know the one on Waterman Street—somebody took a shot at me."

"A gunshot?"

"What other kind of shot did you think I meant?" Her exasperation made her voice sound strained and hoarse. "When we get back to my house I'll show you what it did to my fender."

"And then what happened?"

"Nothing. I dropped my groceries and ducked and after a while, when I realized that that was it, I picked everything up and drove home."

To be sure, the fender was damaged: a hole the size of a nickel was barely visible but much of the surface around it had partially caved in. But I was no expert in these things and whether a bullet was the cause of it or a stone thrown up from the road I couldn't begin to judge.

"Who would want to kill you, though? Or at least frighten you this way?"

Pat shrugged. "I've thought about it. Don't think I haven't, but I don't know. Maybe some friends of Mitch's who feel they've got a score to settle. He had some pretty strange friends."

"I thought it was you who had the strange friends. I had the impression Mitch hung out with a lot of very straight people."

She didn't refute this. She shrugged again. "Would you like a pink lemonade? I learned to make them this summer." She was standing at the door, naturally assuming that I'd come in.

"You have a wonderful knack for changing the subject."

"Well, what about it?"

It was easy to become drunk on her pink lemonades. I believe that she supplemented the lemonade with vodka though it might have been something else equally as—as poisonous? Bad word.

We sat in canvas deck chairs on her back porch; you couldn't see the sun go down with all the maples and elms in the way, but you could

watch the way the light kept changing, flattening out the contours of things until the surrounding woods blurred in the gloom. And when I looked at Pat she was a silhouette in the dark. She made no effort to turn on the porch lights.

I said, "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I'll stay here and maybe something will come to me. Or maybe I won't have to do anything. I'll be dead."

I had never been with her before when she was this fatalistic.

"You could go away, leave this city."

"I've done that before. It wouldn't do any good."

Obviously, I was not suggesting anything she hadn't already considered a thousand times over.

"Well, you can be assured of one thing. If you ever need me I'll be there for you." I said this, not knowing whether I meant it or whether I just wanted her to feel better.

She reached for my hand and took it. "Thank you. I am happy we're friends again. I thought you hated me."

"No, not that, never hate."

Suddenly she sat up, withdrawing her hand from mine. "I am afraid you'll have to go. I've got someone coming over in a little while. Will you forgive me?"

For what? I wanted to know. For dismissing me so abruptly? For confiding the truth in me? For lying to me? For making me an accomplice in the death of her husband?

I gave her a kiss, but she deflected it, turning her head so that my lips brushed her cheek. "It was a wonderful day," she said. "We must do this again."

I drove away, but I didn't go far. When I was out of sight of her house, I pulled over to the side; then got out and walked back. Concealed among the bushes facing her house, I waited restlessly to see who it was she was expecting at this time of night.

After twenty minutes a pair of headlights threw the darkened street into relief. A red Mustang, maybe ten years old, appeared then, and drew to a noisy stop, heralded by crunching gravel.

It was a man; I'd anticipated that.

But what astonished me was that I knew who he was. The man from the cemetery, the Peruvian.

I continued my vigil for nearly an hour more, but he never came out.

By the time I left, the windows in the house were all dark, just as they had been the night Mitch died.

8

The next week she put her house up for sale. I didn't see her, but I saw the sign, a discreet one posted on the lawn. I called her and asked her what it was about.

"No, I'm not leaving town," she said. "I'm just moving into a smaller place, that's all. This is too big for me. Besides it has all these memories."

"Are you trying to raise money fast, Pat, is that it?"

She didn't reply for a time. Then she said, "I could always use the cash."

People do run through money, I thought.

She didn't sell the house quickly; the market was bad and interest rates were way up. Nonetheless, I assumed that she would disappear as thoroughly as she had the last time. But that did not turn out to be the case. Just the opposite; she was constantly phoning me up or coming around to my apartment though the curious thing was she never made it clear what it was she wanted from me. She wasn't looking for a lover and most of the time it seemed she wasn't even looking for conversation. She'd sit at my table, always in the same chair, accepting a glass of chilled wine and remaining there, listless and distracted, saying nothing herself, and seldom listening to me when I spoke.

She was perpetually off in another world. I wasn't allowed in that world and I began to doubt that I cared any longer.

One day I tried to break through. "Pat," I said, "What is your relationship to the Peruvian?"

"The Peruvian? What?" She appeared not to know whom I was talking about. "Oh, Jorge." She stopped there as though that was a sufficient explanation, to offer a name. "He's a . . ." She fumbled for the word. She started to say friend, she ended up saying acquaintance. She neglected to ask me how I knew about him at all.

"You met him when you were in Peru last time?"

She admitted that she had. "He's a dealer. He can get his hands on just about anything you want down there. Alpaca, pre-Columbian artifacts, silver . . ."

"Toxins?"

She wouldn't give me the satisfaction of an answer. But I construed

her silence as answer enough.

"He's come up here to blackmail you, hasn't he? Soak you for all you're worth? That's why you've put the house up for sale."

She abruptly rose, gathering up her handbag and slinging it over her shoulder. "I am going home now," she announced. But before she left, maybe to show that there were no hard feelings, she kissed me and said, "You know, I did love Mitch. Not always as a husband, sometimes more like a father, but I did love him."

And with that she was gone.

9

I searched, at first half-heartedly, then with more fervor, for a woman who would have the capacity to vanquish Pat from my psyche. (Even though I was certain I'd shaken her loose from me I'd wake up early in the mornings to find her still with me, a ghostly presence that I harbored like an infection.)

And eventually I did find someone who, if nothing else, at least took my mind off her: a quiet and good-humored woman who was nothing like Pat. She was attractive in a certain way and taught as an instructor in the classics department; she exhibited a saneness of mind and an evenness of temper that was particularly refreshing after Pat.

Her name was Marie Hamlin and I was with her that early September night when Pat showed up, unannounced of course, banging repeatedly on my door.

I had told Marie about Pat, not everything, but enough. Still she was amazed to see Pat tear into the apartment, her face contorted with terror, her hands flailing uselessly at the air. She must have seemed a mad woman to her; she was certainly drunk. She barely registered Marie's presence in the room.

"You have to help me," she said. "You have to come with me."

"What's wrong with you?" I was in no mood for her melodramas tonight, and was angry besides for her intruding like this.

"I know they're going to kill me, so help me God I know."

"No one's going to kill you, Pat. You've been carrying on like this for months and nothing's happened. Go home and get some sleep."

I was so brusque with her, so cold, that she suddenly stiffened and fell silent. Her eyes explored mine, seeking more than I was willing to give her. After a moment's hesitation, she relented. "All right, all right then."

"Pat, I'll call a cab for you, you're in no condition to drive."

"No," she said, already running out the door. "No, I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine." I watched her from the window. She got into the car and drove away with a harsh squeal of rubber burning into the street.

"Maybe you shouldn't have thrown her out like that," Marie said tentatively. "She was so distraught."

"You don't know her. She gets like that. I've had enough of it. My God, I've had enough of it."

Yet I couldn't get to sleep from thinking about her. Marie fell asleep and I saw no sense in waking her. I left her a note. It wasn't much of a note; I really didn't know what to say.

There was a light on in the bedroom window; I imagined her still up, pacing the floor, dialing the numbers of everybody she could think of, wanting desperately to talk, but even in her drunkenness careful not to say too much, to let slip that one detail that might give her away.

It was an hour or two before dawn and there was a gray light seeping in through the trees. The brook sounded louder to me now, I don't know why, maybe because there was so much silence everywhere else. I noticed that the small red light by the door was on, indicating that the alarm system was activated. I rang the bell.

Again and again I rang the bell, but there was no response. I gazed up at the bedroom but saw no sign of life there. I figured that she'd probably slipped into such a sound sleep that no bell was going to wake her for hours to come.

I had started back to my car when I happened to spot her white Porsche in the driveway. The lightening skies permitted me a better view than I would have had only half an hour previously. I made out, or thought I did, the back of Pat's head through the rear window of the car.

She must have fallen asleep just as soon as she pulled in, I thought.

I peered in. The first thing I noticed was her hair, how it was caked with blood. I had to go around to the other side before I had a glimpse of what the exit wound was like. It was like this: of her lovely face nothing whole was left.

It didn't occur to me until much later that the car itself had suffered no damage. Her killers had been very careful.

We met in the bar in the Holiday Inn downtown. It was early in the

evening and businessmen were beginning to drift in, eager for whisky after a long day's drudgery. The man I was meeting was a businessman of sorts but he didn't much keep regular hours.

His name was Kastin. I wasn't told whether this was his first or last name, but I gathered that Kastin was all that it was necessary to know.

He was in his mid-fifties with a bulging stomach and a face that didn't seem to want to adhere to his skull any more; he bore a look of sorrow and disillusionment, like an aged clown.

He evidently was told how to identify me for he took just one glance around the bar before joining me at the corner table I'd chosen.

"Kastin," he said wearily, gripping my hand. He ordered a Virgin Mary, explaining that his gut wasn't dependable any more, it wasn't even all his actually. "Doctors took half of it out last year."

I had had a hell of a time digging this man up. It had taken me months to put the right connections in place. Now he said, "I'll give you fifteen minutes. That's all I got that I can give away for nothing."

Four months for fifteen minutes. Well, I was willing to go far to satisfy my curiosity. To Tierra del Fuego if need be. This was much more convenient: a ten-minute ride downtown.

And anyway, Kastin shouldn't have acted so put upon; he was merely reciprocating a favor for a friend of a friend of mine. But I accepted his conditions; I really had no choice.

"Why was Pat Zacharias killed?" I began.

"Frank told you I'd tell you?"

"Frank said you might."

Kastin pulled a cigarette out from a pack of menthols. "I don't suppose it makes much difference now. The guy who put a contract out on her, he's far beyond the reach of the law."

The Peruvian, was what I thought.

"Who was it?"

"Her husband, he's the one who ordered the hit."

"Mitch Zacharias?"

"Yeah, I guess that was the bastard's name."

"He died in April, she was killed in September. How could he have ordered the hit?" I had the feeling that either Kastin was having me on or that he was only passing himself off as an authority on local underworld intrigues.

"I know all about that. But see, he was getting to think that maybe she

was planning on killing him. What I hear, she had a deal down somewhere in South America”

“Peru.”

“Okay, Peru. There’s some joker she hitches up with, he finds her the poison, they make a deal. She’ll join him when her husband’s dead. Or he’ll join her when it feels right. Mitch starts getting suspicious, this was when she came back from Peru. He has this feeling there’s got to be another man. Well, the story goes she didn’t want him to suspect her spick so she finds another man, a local. Kind of what you’d call a diversionary tactic. Understand?” I understood all right.

Kastin continued, more enthusiastic now as he got midway into his tale: “After the first time he took sick, he figured what he’d do was test her. He told her he was thinking of changing his will, giving her more money outright if he died instead of putting most of it into a trust fund the bank would control for her. She jumped at the idea. That got to him, you see, that got to him. But he went along with it, he changed the will. He keeps thinking that she really does love him, that this can’t be happening, and he’s ready to ignore the whole thing, let bygones be bygones. But there’s this gnawing little voice that keeps saying to him: Maybe she’ll kill me one night and no one will know.

“So he has friends. He’s got this respectable image in town, but he has friends, you know what I mean. They’re good friends, they’re the right kind of friends. He goes to them. He tells them his story. He says to them, something happens to me, something strange and final, then here’s a phone number you can call and here’s the kind of money you can expect once you make that call. You understand what I’m saying?” He glanced at his watch; time was running out.

“I think I do.”

“But the way the hit’s arranged, it’s spaced out, a little at a time. He wants her scared like he was. It was only when she was getting ready to leave town that it was decided to make the hit. She had her ticket to Peru. She was just waiting for her house to be sold, then she was going to split.”

“Do you know for a fact that she poisoned him?”

“That’s what I hear. But nobody knows it for a fact. Nobody knows nothing for a fact.”

“But what good would it do Mitch, having her killed? He’d never even know it happened.”

Kastin shrugged. "Maybe he wanted her to join him. Maybe he was lonely." He looked again at his watch. "Time's up," he said.

It took six months before a headstone replaced the temporary marker they had on her grave. I went out finally to visit her—to visit them both.

The gravestones were both of marble, but they were white, unlike the brown stone Mitch's parents were under. There was no epitaph on either, just the names and the dates.

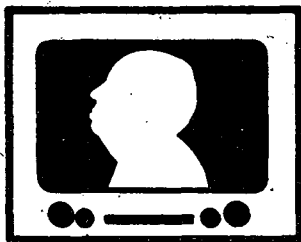
It did me no good to speculate about what I could have done or had failed to do, my mind was weary from such speculation. I had long before exhausted myself of anger and bitterness. I was just tired, deeply tired. I told myself I would go to the graves once and that would be it. There would be no need to do so again.

Strange, but I still believed that maybe Pat had told me the truth, that Mitch's death was none of her doing. I believed also that she could have escaped her fate, but didn't want to, and maybe at the end was convinced herself of her guilt and was merely waiting around for the punishment to be meted out to her.

About the only thing I am sure of is this: that there is just one real mystery in this world and that is the mystery of the human heart.



The August issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale June 24.



CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

Just as Charlie Chan in his cinematic heyday seemed to be on an endless Grand Tour, disembarking in each movie at interesting ports of call, Hercule Poirot in his current screen adventures also travels—and first class. *Murder on the Orient Express* introduced the celebrated sleuth to wide new audiences who flocked to see him in *Death on the Nile* as well. The just-released *Evil Under the Sun*, in which murder splashes in the Adriatic Sea, continues the successful formula: glittering locale, glittering people. The Christie movie as top-cabin entertainment seems to have arrived.

It was not always thus. Some Christie movie adaptations have been decidedly less than distinguished; others have been unfairly forgotten. Let us review Christie on screen, with special attention to some Lost Christie, and to some other less than familiar titles.

Sadly, there are no prints in easy circulation of the first British film versions of the Hercule Poirot investigations. Poirot was quite a popular detective figure in England in the 1930's; he was first portrayed on the London stage by Charles Laughton in an adaptation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* called *Alibi*. Although the novel's celebrated, shocking, final twist could not transpose well to either stage or screen, *Alibi* became a movie in 1931. (It followed a Harley Quin story filmed in England three years before and a Tuppence and Tommy Beresford adventure adapted by a German movie studio. Both films have now, however, vanished.)

In the movie version of *Alibi*, Poirot was impersonated by a tall, lean actor named Austin Trevor, who had the intense look of a criminologist

but bore very little resemblance to Christie's creation. Nonetheless, Trevor had a classical education and could do a French accent rather well; that was why, he felt, he had been given the role. He subsequently played Poirot two more times.

Black Coffee was another Poirot investigation taken from a stage success. Most of the action is set in the manor of a munitions king: a secret formula has disappeared and murder has been done. *Lord Edgware Dies*, based on Christie's *Thirteen at Dinner*, was a far more complex case. An elderly lord is murdered while his vain wife, an actress and a prime suspect, is in full view of twelve guests at a dinner party. The best film of the three, it was the last Poirot case to reach the screen for decades.

The next Christie adaptation also came from a stage play, the London hit *Love from a Stranger* (based on a short story, "Philomel Cottage"). A shy spinster—Ann Harding—wins quite a bit of money in a sweepstakes and is, in turn, swept off her feet by a romantic stranger, Basil Rathbone. After a swift courtship, they marry and go to live, at Rathbone's insistence, in a remote cottage. We know he is a maniacal killer who has already buried three wives in the cellar. At the climax, the defenseless wife, suddenly realizing her doom, attempts to turn the tables on her husband.

It is a dramatic confrontation that works extraordinarily well—so well, indeed, that the 1937 film was remade ten years later with Sylvia Sidney and John Hodiak in the leading roles and the setting changed to turn-of-the-century America. The period New England location accommodated the drama nicely, and John Hodiak, his teeth gleaming as he laughs insanely, is memorable.

In 1945, one of the cleverest mysteries ever filmed was drawn from Christie: *And Then There Were None*. On an isolated island ten souls are marooned and are killed, one by one, to the instructions of a nursery rhyme. The movie is a favorite and is still shown often on television, and the story has twice been remade, set the first time in a hotel in the Alps reachable only by cable car and the second time in a lonely hotel in an Iranian desert. Neither new version quite holds up to the original, however.

Witness for the Prosecution was another stage triumph that was turned by Billy Wilder, in 1957, into an even better film. Tyrone Power is a young ne'er-do-well standing trial for murder; his barrister (Charles Laughton) is shocked when the man's foreign-born wife (a somber Marlene Dietrich) testifies against him. It's only the first surprise in a twisting,

remarkable film that makes occasional appearances still in revival theaters and is worth your attention.

The adaptations of Christie works that followed rarely rose above B-film level. A flighty, bustling Margaret Rutherford was cast as village sleuth Miss Marple in a series of low-budget mysteries that pleased fans of the actress but few others. Later, the same British studio presented us with a heavily-disguised Tony Randall portraying Hercule Poirot in a confused adaptation of *The ABC Murders* called *The Alphabet Murders*. And Glynis Johns played the assertive, crime-solving heroine of *The Spider's Web*, from yet another Christie stage vehicle, but that, too, was a low-budget venture, seen only on American television.

In 1972, the distinguished British director Sidney Gilliat tackled a difficult Christie novel, *Endless Night*, published to critical acclaim five years before. A mystery without a formal detective, layered with complexity, the film tells of a working-class youth who wins and marries an heiress, a romance that ends in tragedy and perhaps murder. The most spellbinding and sensitive of any Christie screen treatment, this wonderful, beguiling motion picture has never been released in this country, and has had only limited television exposure. Catch it if you can; *Endless Night* is quite rewarding.

Two years later, Sidney Lumet, after protracted negotiations, received permission from Agatha Christie to film *Murder on the Orient Express*, stocked the train with important stars, and achieved both a boxoffice and a critical bonanza. Two Poirots and one Marple have followed, all given the same expensive gloss. But because we are exploring lesser Christies, let us look instead at some of the works of the Queen of Mystery recently on television.

Last year, two of Christie's lighter novels were finally allowed to appear on British TV. *The Seven Dials Mystery* starts out with a practical joke built around eight alarm clocks set to go off together—but not loudly enough to wake the dead. Cheryl Campbell plays a sprightly 1920's heroine, Lady Eileen "Bundles" Brent, who both catches a murderer and exposes a secret society. *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* begins with murder on a golf links, is also in period, and is a very satisfying mystery. As an extra touch, Peter Ustinov was the host for their American telecasts, filming from the late Agatha Christie's home.

Then, this past January, CBS-TV went to England to make Christie's *Murder Is Easy*, a two-hour mystery exploring one of the author's favorite

themes, a quiet picture-postcard village concealing seething evil. A young computer expert (Bill Bixby), travelling by train to London, falls into conversation with a charming fellow passenger, an elderly lady (Helen Hayes). To his surprise, she tells him she is actually on her way to Scotland Yard to present evidence of three murders that, she feels, have recently occurred in her country village, Wychwood Under Ashe. If one is audacious enough, she tells him, "Murder is easy." Our hero doesn't believe her for a moment, but his companion is such an old dear that he presents her with a copy of a computer study he has written. After they part at Victoria Station, we hear a squeal of brakes. The young man pushes through a gathering crowd to find his computer book in the street, splattered with blood. He resolves to go to Wychwood himself, to investigate the village's recent deaths—and the deaths to come.

Murder Is Easy was a good way to start the year, and *Evil Under the Sun* continues the Christie tradition. While she was alive, we looked forward to an Agatha Christie book as an annual event. Now it appears that we can settle back and enjoy at least one Christie *film* yearly. Good news indeed; crime on screen could scarcely get better.

(continued from page 72)

have died. My performance had been nothing to cheer.

Shana cleared her throat. "I suppose you'd say that this day was not typical."

"Hardly," I said drily. "But it did give you something to write about."

"In that case, I'd better stay on a little longer to see what really goes on here."

I grinned. "On one condition. When you do write your article, try not to make me appear too stupid."

The light in her eyes danced. "That might be difficult, but then I *am* a good writer. We'll talk about that over the dinner you promised me. I've never eaten broiled brook trout."

"It just might turn out to be the highlight of your visit," I said solemnly.

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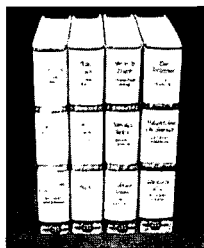
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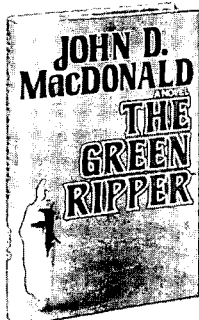
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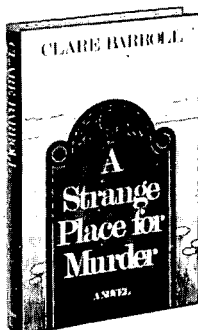
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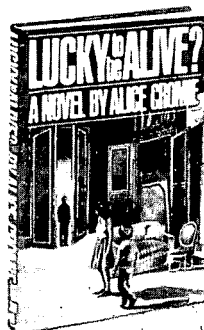
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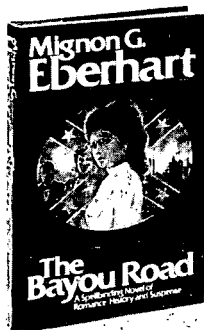
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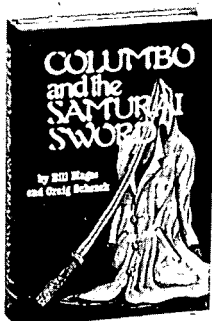
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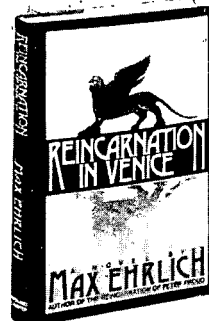
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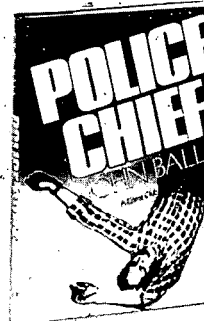
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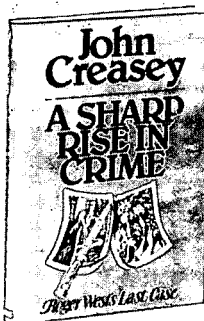
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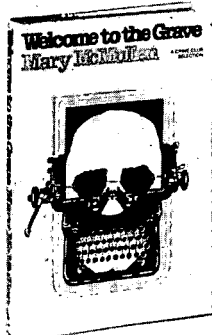
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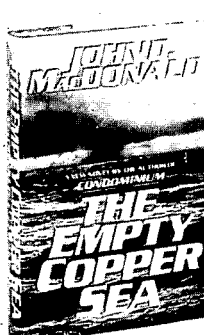
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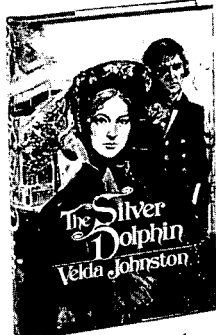
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